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ABSTRACT

The literature on essay testing, and particularly the selection of topics which will stimulate the writing of essays, was reviewed in order to recommend a set of specifications that will produce topics that are maximally fair to all teacher certificate candidates. It was found that by far the greater part of the research relating to writing assessment was concerned with the completed essay, and with how to evaluate it reliably. Only a relatively few researchers in the national testing services and at universities have concerned themselves in a systematic fashion with the effects of variations in essay topics on student writing performance. Specifications to be followed in producing fair topics should: (1) supply essential rhetorical specifications via simulations or role-playing scenarios: (2) call for types and levels of discourse that approximate those which teachers are likely to have to use in the discharge of their professional duties: (3) deal specifically with educational situations: and (4) are presented in at least two variations, one suited to primary and elementary teachers, another to middle and high school teachers. Sixteen topics intended to meet the foregoing specifications are provided. (RL)

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ON WRITING ESSAY TOPICS FOR A TEST OF THE COMPOSITION SKILLS OF PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS

With a Review of Literature on the Creation, Validation, and Effects of Topics on Essay Examinations

James Hoetker

College of Education
Florida State University

VOLUME FOUR OF FIVE

Under Contract to the Department of Teacher Education
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The judging of writing ability of students is a problem because of the great disagreement among English teachers as to the nature of good writing. Objective tests are of little help, since they are not measures of writing. Essay tests are the only valid measure, but to make them as reliable and valid as possible requires that attention be given to a number of sources of error.

Typically the problem of error is writing tests is conceived of as more a matter or reliability than validity, and of arising from three sources: students, readers, and topics. A number of other sources are important as well, however, and the aspect of validity is at least as important as reliability if not more so.

The importance of fluctuation in performance of a single writer from task to task is perhaps exaggerated. If all other sources of error in a writing test are removed or controlled, the most logical strategy may be to accept a single performance as a valid one even if it is the writer's worst, since a test by definition is a decisive trial and *ipso facto* imposes the worst possible conditions. *There are no relevant research findings here*.

--McColly, "What Does Educational Research Say About the Judging of Writing Ability?" (1970, p. 147; emphasis added).

The foam,
Feathering across that deck a year ago,
Swept those...words--like seeds--beyond the seas
Into his future. There they grew like trees.

--Peter Viereck, "*Vale* from Carthage
(*Spring*, 1944)."

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A NOTE ON THE STYLE OF THIS ESSAY

When one writes on the subject of writing he puts himself in an exposed position. There are fewer more predictable sources of universal glee than the lapse from good usage that occurs in the context of a discussion of good usage. At the risk of depriving the reader of some innocent good fun, let me note that my argument as it developed has not allowed itself to be cast entirely into the conventional language of a scholarly paper. From section to section and even within sections, the person will be found to shift from first to second to third and back again according to the needs and purposes of the argument. The auctorial "I" alternates with the editorial "we" and the impersonal "one" according to whether I am expressing a purely personal opinion, trying to carry the reader with me through a new twist in the argument, or recounting some theory or piece of research to which my opinion is irrelevant. Even worse for the sensibilities of some readers, I have indulged in shifts of tone and register as they reflect my own opinions of the matter at issue. I can only offer, as justification for my stylistic choices, my hope that the paper reads more easily, interestingly, and entertainingly than it would had I stuffed and crammed my prose into a consistent rhetorical mold.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

The Florida Teacher Competency Examination will be administered several times a year to thousands of teaching certification candidates from all parts of the country. Some candidates will just have been awarded degrees, while others will have been teaching for years. Some will have been attended progressive or experimental institutions, while others will have graduated from fundamentalist religious colleges. Some will have specialized in academic disciplines such as English, history, mathematics, science, or foreign languages; others will have gone through a generalist preparation for elementary teaching; still others will have concentrated in areas ranging from art and music through physical education and home economics, which tend to emphasize performance rather than abstract verbal learning; and some will have specialized in the newer ancillary fields of study such as reading and special education. While there are undoubtedly some correlations between a graduate's academic background and his or her intellectual capacity and learning, these correlations are far from perfect; the relationships between one's intellectual ability and learning and his or her capacity to develop into an effective teacher are even more uncertain.

Attempts to develop a psychological profile of the effective teacher and to construct instruments to identify effective teachers before the fact have been notably unsuccessful.

Similarly, attempts to construct tests of knowledge, skills, and reasoning processes that will predict teaching success--such as the National Teacher Examination--have been disappointing. There are simply so many ways in which a teacher may be a good teacher and so many ways in which a teacher may be bad, that no one has successfully defined the parameters of the problems. We must inevitably fall back on some set of philosophical or psychological or ideological positions to determine what are the "right" answers a potentially good teacher will give on a test, and, since any educational theory is partial and incomplete, it will just as inevitably be shown that the ability to choose the right answers on such a test are pretty uncertainly related to teaching success as measured by such after-the-fact measures as student learning, peer esteem, administrator evaluations, persistence in the profession, and the like.

At the very best, the predictions we can make with confidence are negative ones, and those based more on common sense than science. A secondary teacher, it is safe to say, for instance, cannot do a respectable job of teaching his subject unless he is thoroughly trained in it. However, the converse is not true, since sophistication in a particular discipline is not necessarily a good predictor of the ability to teach it. Similarly, we can say that, regardless of his or her other accomplishments, a teacher who has some sort of disabling psychological disorder is unlikely to be an effective teacher. However, even here, almost everyone can probably recall a particularly inspiring teacher who was, outside of the classroom, a recluse or even a certified crazy.

About all we can say, in fact, with any real certainty, is that someone who cannot read or write cannot teach anyone else to read or write. No teacher, then, whose responsibilities directly or indirectly include the academic development of students, can be an effective teacher unless he possesses a linguistic competence considerably beyond that of his students. But does this proposition imply that there should be differential acceptable levels of verbal competence for kindergarten and senior high school teachers? And would even a simple literacy requirement be completely reasonable for, say, art teachers or physical education teachers--since outside of education there are great artist who are notoriously inarticulate and successful coaches who are practically unlettered but gifted with great powers of communicating orally and physically? These latter cases are surely exceptions, though, instances of a genius's intense specialization in his art to the exception of everything else, and not very pertinent to the case of the average school teacher.

Teachers do have to write, and it would be extremely difficult to argue that it is not essential for a teacher to be literate at some level beyond that of the general population. Attempts to propound any such argument would inevitably involve condescension to the teaching profession or the sacrificing of children's learning to some extraneous social or political "greater good."

Let it be offered that the relationship between simple literacy and the ability to teach is self-apparent, so that tests of the abilities to read and write (unlike other tests) have face validity as a qualification for a teaching certificate. (And let the question be put off for another occasion, whether the present concern for the literacy of college graduates is a sign of a gross decline in academic standards or merely an artifact of the circumstance that in the past we merely assumed without checking that college attendance necessarily bestowed literacy.)

The Council on Teacher Education (COTE, 1979) has decided that the written literacy of certification candidates shall be tested by means of an impromptu essay written on a topic supplied by the examiners, with the quality of this essay to be judged holistically by a team of expert raters. The specific concern of the present paper is with what that topic should be and how it should be developed.

Let us assume there are two student, A and B. A is a good or even a gifted writer. B, on the contrary, though indubitably literate, finds writing painful and does not do it easily or awfully well. An ideal topic would be one on which both A and B were able to perform to the best of their respective abilities, so that the ratings would accurately reflect the students' absolute levels of competence as well as the differences between them. However, unlike a competitive testing situation, in which it is of most importance to make decisions between students at the higher levels of ability, in a competency testing situation, it is of most importance to get an accurate reading of the writing abilities of the students toward the lower end of the distribution. (This is noted since, as will become clear later on, most of the literature on essay testing deals with college placement and college equivalency situations.)

In a competency testing situation, it does not matter whether the topic set is complex and challenging enough to allow the gifted student to show how high he or she can fly; it does matter that the topic provides an occasion for the average and below-average student to do the best job of writing of which he or she is capable. How important is the topic in determining the quality of what is written? Is it, for instance, possible to construct a topic on which our gifted student A will turn out an essay inferior in quality of expression to that of mediocre student B? Probably not--even in a situation where A were asked to write on a subject of which he was completely ignorant, he could write a confession of ignorance that would clearly demonstrate his superior literacy. Is it possible, on the other hand, to present a topic that would render student B inarticulate? Probably there are many ways. Foremost among these would be by setting topics calling for information outside the candidate's competence, or topics demanding skills valued by the examiner but foreign to the candidate (certain logical or critical skills, for example), or topics relying on a familiarity with customs common to some social classes but not to others or on a familiarity with academic conventions that are learned in some universities and some disciplines but not in others.

The burden of this paper, given these considerations, will be to review the literature on essay testing, and particularly on the topic as an aspect of essay testing, in order to be able to recommend a set of specifications that will produce topics that are maximally fair to all candidates.

A perfectly normal response to that last statement would be surprise that such an undertaking should be necessary. After all, there are tens of thousands of people teaching writing and all of them routinely evaluate their students' compositions; the literature on composition teaching is immense, and, at a more formal level, the College Board has been evaluating student writing ability for almost eighty years. Surely, by now, there must be general agreement about so basic a matter as the sorts of topics that are likely to produce typical samples of student writing.

Unfortunately, that is not the case at all. By far the greater part of the research--and even of the closely observed practice--relating to writing assessment has been concerned with the other end of the process, the completed essay, and especially with how to evaluate it reliably. Similarly, a great part of the pedagogical literature is concerned with providing effective ways of feeding back to individual students information that will help them improve subsequent essays. Many books and articles, of course, have been devoted to the writing assignment as an aspect of the process of teaching composition. But few of these could be called research--being rather, at their best, persuasively reasoned and detailed accounts of practices preferred by their authors, and based more or less convincingly on some psychological theory or theory of discourse. The writing assignments to be found in most books and essays on composition teaching--though some of them are sensitive, ingenious, lovingly sculpted, and undoubtedly entirely effective for their purposes--are rarely appropriate or even practicable for a one-shot summative evaluation such as the Teacher Competency Examination. Only a relatively few researchers in the national testing services and at universities in America and the United Kingdom have concerned themselves in a systematic fashion with the effects of variations in essay topics on student writing performance.

AN INTERLUDE FOR SKEPTICS

Before moving on, it might be well to address the educational skeptic who will question whether all this "scientific" activity being undertaken in the interests of fairness, objectivity, and consistency of topics[1] is likely to make much real difference. More specifically, he will ask, are the teachers who pass this examination more likely to be good teachers than teachers who would pass an examination consisting of instructions to "write a paragraph in the next ten minutes," and a rating panel of one randomly selected citizen?

To take first the matter of the ratings, the literature is replete with stories of untrained raters assigning a single essay every grade from A through F. Of course no one would care to be the writer who had to repeat the test because his perfectly competent essay was given an F by a crochety rater; but looking at the whole competency examination process, where the essays are used as a screening device for many thousands of aspiring teachers, how important in the long run are a few such inconveniences to the operation of the state's school system?

Before making the conventional objections, consider that all present-day essay examinations are pale and diminished descendants of the 19th-century British Civil Service Examinations. Back then, any young gentleman aspiring to a cushy post in India had to submit to writing for many hours on various topics judged to be of central importance to governors of heathen colonies--Greek and Roman classics, for example, history, natural philosophy. When the young gentleman had written, his essays were sent off to an anonymous reader, most likely a dusty don with family connections who needed the reading fee. The reader's judgments were usually final and determined whether a particular candidate reached India as a first-class passenger or a member of an infantry regiment.

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[1] The question to which students write is variously referred to as the stimulus, topic, assignment, problem, task, situation, and so on. "Topic" will be consistently preferred in this paper.

The British Civil Service Examinations, that is to say, developed with a grand and utter disregard for such concerns as content validity or reliability of rater judgments. So, in fact, did the whole vast and immensely important system of British school and university examinations. (After all, to question another's ability competently to assess an essay would be--impolite.)

It would be, our skeptic would submit, extremely difficult to concoct an argument in favor of the proposition that the Empire would have been better, or more humanely, or more profitably administered if the Civil Service Examination had, instead, been prepared and graded according to the best practices of the Educational Testing Service. And, in fact, he might note that when, after the Second World War, British examiners became concerned with such American issues as reliability, the Empire (perhaps by coincidence) was lost and England declined to a third-rate power. (For a more serious account of the matter, see R. J. Montgomery, Examinations: An Account of Their Evolution as Administrative Devices in England.)

Our skeptical friend would likely approach the question of the validity of the essay topic from a psychological rather than an historical point of view. Why worry he would ask, about the phrasing and content of the question? The good student, in any case, will answer the question the examiner meant to ask rather than the one he said -- because he has learned to write to the situation rather than the topic. Other students will sort themselves out by less creative misreadings, and that is what the test is intended to accomplish after all.

It is true that not only on a test but in daily life the situational context of an utterance may do more to determine how one responds to it that the grammatical form or lexical content of the utterance. When you telephone an important person, for example, and his secretary asks, "May I tell him who is calling?" you do not, unless you are feeling pixyish, give the answer that the question logically demands--something on the order of "Yeah, why not?" or "If you wish" or "Sure, I don't care." Instead you give the secretary your name and maybe your title, because you know that her question is a polite code phrase from some handbook on secretarial etiquette that means, "Who are you anyway, and are you important enough for my boss to want to talk to you?"

In the same manner, when a good student is asked on an examination, "Should every able-bodied citizen be required to spend a period of time in the armed forces?" he or she does not answer, "Yes" or "No." One who did so, even thought the question deserves precisely such a monosyllabic dismissal, would be judged a fool or a wise guy and given a failing grade. Good students have learned that it is part of a student's responsibility to make silken questions from the pig's-ears teachers give them, and they do so as second nature. Even to the most stupidly-phrased topic good students will respond as if the topic were a marvel of thoughtful leading-forth and coolly compose essays that conform to the academic conventions they knows their readers value.

Poorer students, on the other hand, lacking adequate guidance from the topic and perhaps even foolish enough to believe that their essays will have a reader who really cares how they feel, may, in the effort to communicate with naked honesty, compose, not the desired academic essay, but rambling, stammering meditation, or skillful but unwanted personal narratives, or even prose lyrics. Good students, of course, realizes that their reader is as uninterested in the student's feelings as the student is in the topic--that the test is simply a pretense to draw out a specimen of prose that can be put under a critical microscope. Would it be too skeptical of our skeptical friend to propose that, in fact, the abruptness and ambiguity of some examination question from grade school through the doctoral comprehensives may be (if perhaps unconsciously) purposeful, in that the ultimate real reason for most examinations is to separate those who are worthy by virtue of their attunement to the unvoiced nuances of academic discourse from those who are not?[2]

If our imaginary skeptic's views have been strongly phrased, it is, of course, because I believe them to be worthy of serious consideration. Why is is worth so much trouble to produce a writing test? If the sole purpose of an examination of writing skills were simply to assure the public that gross illiterates are not being given teaching certificates, then a much less complex and taxing process than the one outlined in the Examination Handbook would certainly suffice. Candidates could be asked to write anything at all and the illiterates would not be able to. It would be that simple. But if the purpose of the examination is to establish some genuine and defensible standards for teachers, then attention must be given to the validity of those standards and to the fairness of their application--if for no other reason than because late 20th-century Americans denied admission to a profession they have successfully prepared for, will (rather than merely stiffening their lips) go straight to court. And their lawyers will know all about validity and reliability.

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[2] The skeptic's strictures on casual teacher-made essay topics would not apply to the carefully-develop and well-phrased essay topics on instruments developed by the national testing services; but he would still object that, to the extent their structuring is a matter of manifest content, rather than rhetorical specification, the topics still play to the same hidden agenda--rewarding students who can best behave like professors. The subject is dealt with at length later.

But beyond that, there are positive reasons for making the writing test as good as it can possibly be. A writing test will have a backwash effect on teacher-training curricula--if students know they will be held responsible for writing well, they will become concerned and demand more attention be given to their writing. At least some professors who have depended on objective tests will begin to assign writing; others who have assigned writing but have read it just for "content" will begin to comment a bit on the conventions of civilized discourse. And that will be all to the good.

Even further, if the examination is well and carefully done, the data from successive administrations of it will form an invaluable corpus of data for researchers, whose work can lead to clarification of some of the vexed and tangled problems involved in the assessment of writing ability and provide guidance to teacher education programs about the language needs of students and how to serve them.

BUT DOES THE TOPIC MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

Of course the topic makes a difference. Otherwise, why have topics? Otherwise, just ask examinees to write about something they want to write on. The problem is that there is almost no considerable research about what precise differences the topic may make. Or to whom. A study by Rosen (1969) tends to confirm the already-conjectured adaptability of the superior student to different topics; he found that when students were asked to write successively in different modes--exposition, story, argument--the most able writers produced the greatest variation in T-unit length from mode to mode. (Might this also suggest--in connection with another aspect of the topic problem--that the gathering of multiple samples of writing would tend to benefit mostly the superior student?) At the other extreme, it is hard to imagine a topic so cleverly conceived that it can lead a marginally literate student to write a presentable essay. So the quality and the content of a question are probably of the greatest consequence to the broad middle range of students.

The purpose of a writing test, remember is not simply to assess the quality of a single piece of writing; it is to form an estimate of the examinee's general ability to write. That is, as E. D. Hirsch puts it in his Philosophy of Composition (1977), "the purpose of the sample is to yeld inferences about how well the student will write still further 'samples' in a variety of writing situations" (p. 187). "Another corollary point," Hirsch continues,

> is less obvious and perhaps less well-known. A student will exhibit far greater variations in the quality of his ideas and aims than in the quality of his presentations. One topic is more productive of good thinking for student A than student B, and a different topic will reverse the results. This has been convincingly established in researches by Freedman and Nold (Hirsch, 1977, pp. 187-88; see also Freedman, 1977 and 1978).

As the holistic rating system focuses the rater's attention more on the quality of expression than on the ideational content of a writing sample, Hirsh's point suggests that between-topic differences are probably less crucial in a competency test than in, say, a final examination in a college course.

Clarity--especially about what sort of writing is wanted--is probably the most important aspect of topic quality; indeed, Payne (1969) would claim that "the possible ambiguity which results from the indefiniteness of an essay task is probably the single most important contribution to unreliability" (p. 82).

That the content-area of a topic can be important is most dramatically demonstrated in an experiment by Rushton and Young (1974) in which the essays of British sixth-form public school students were compared with those of factory workers of the same age. On most topics, the language from the two samples did indeed display the difference between "elaborated" and "restricted" linguistic codes (Bernstein, 1962) that have typically been found to distinguish educated and working class speakers. However, when the two groups were asked to write on a technical subject, "the linguistic disadvantage of the working class groups was wiped out" (Rushton and Young, 1974, p. 181). Studies by Freedman (1977 and 1978) similarly demonstrate that the essay ratings can be affected by manipulating topics.

Rosen (1965) illustrates just what differences the topic can make by presenting two essays, the first (A) written on the topic "A Typical Day's Shopping" and the second (B) on the abstraction, "Boredom."

> If we examine the actual language of a pupil, set the right subject and the wrong subject, we shall find a tremendous variation in adequacy and command. The two essays...illustrate this point perfectly. They were both written under exam conditions,...The writer is a girl fifteen and a half. Look how comfortable she is in Essay A. The mother's behaviour is most carefully selected, and the leaps in time are handled with ease....she is in command of her form and her material. She is making words do what she wants them to do. The tone is unified. What a pleasure it is to read it....In Essay B the language stalls. It can't be

> stretched around the vast generalization. The tone staggers..., errors creep in, she repeats herself, awkardly goes parsonical and undertakes a sermon on human behaviour....There is some trace of organization, but it won't sustain the theme. It's serious enough, but superficial, desperate, and above all, deadly dull (Rosen, 1965, p. 79).

What Rosen has demonstrated here is really that his young student is more comfortable and competent in one mode (the personal narrative) than in another (the contemplative essay). But what does one do about topics is he wishes to assess a student's ability to write an essay rather than a narrative? And to what extent are the effects of differences between topics within the same mode comparable to those between topics calling for different modes?

We do not know. We need more research. (Our skeptic, who has just been waiting for that remark, collapses in laughter.) But in the meantime, while we are waiting, let us see what we can make of the rest of the literature.

SCOPE AND METHOD OF THE LITERATURE SEARCH

The search of the literature on topics confirmed the initial impression that the topic--the stimulus to writing--is indeed the most neglected aspect of writing evaluation. There is some research, though, and several pertinent theoretical analyses, so the recommendations that will be made at the conclusion of this paper fall somewhere between authoritative and arbitrary and are based on the best recent work.

The bibliography that accompanies this paper contains citations of the major studies and essays on the assessment of writing competency.[3] It also contains a representative selection of other books, papers, and reports that illustrate the variety of attitudes held and practices followed in regard to the creation, editing, selection, and presentation of essay topics, both in national testing programs and in more informal institutional programs and classroom situations.

For the record, it may be well to specify the sources of information that were consulted in the search. The chapter bibilographies in two recent volumes edited by Charles Cooper and Lee Odell--Evaluating Writing (1977) and Research on Composing (1978)--were the starting points for the investigation. Computer searches of the Educational Resources Information Clearinghouse (ERIC) system were made. The pertinent chapters and bibliographies in the two editions of the Handbook of Research on Teaching, The Encyclopedia of Educational Research, and other standard reference works were consulted.

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[3] With some possible exceptions due to the circumstance that a few apparently promising items were published in journals that are not available locally and could not be obtained within the time allotted to this review.

Early on, it was established that the landmark study in the area is the one done by Godschalk, Swineford, and Coffman for Educational Testing Service and published in 1966 as The Measurement of Writing Ability. It is almost invariably cited in subsequent studies, and it was therefore decided that 1967 should be made the starting date for a systematic search of other information sources. Accordingly, volume-by volume searches, 1967 through 1979, were made in Dissertation Abstracts International, the Education Index, Science Citation Index, and Social Science Citation Index; issue-by-issue surveys were made for the same period of the professional journals and national testing service publications likeliest to contain items relating to essay topics and essay evaluation--American Educational Research Journal, College Composition and Communication, College English, Educational Measurement, English Education, English Journal and a variety of periodicals and research reports from the College Board, Educational Testing Service, American College Testing Program, and the National Assessment of Educational Progess. Then, chapters on essay testing in college textbooks on educational measurement published since 1967 were examined. Finally, letters were written to individual authors and sponsoring institutions for copies of potentially relevant papers delivered at this year's meetings of The American Educational Research Association and The National Conference on Measurement in Education.

In the course of these procedures, over five hundred items were identified and inspected. The larger number were discarded. In some cases the titles were misleading and the articles were not pertinent. The practitioner literature--"How our college evaluates _etc._"--proved to be of value mainly as a source of redundant illustrations of a cavalier disregard for the importance of the essay topic and only a few illustrative titles are retained in the bibliography. Research and essays on the writing of young children--the best work in the field, without any doubt--were reluctantly eliminated as being of uncertain applicability to the situation of the college-educated adult writer. Articles that consisted solely on opinionated debates on the objective versus essay test issue were thankfully discarded. Finally, so were those that dealt narrowly with the assessment of subject matter knowledge, usually in literature.

SOURCES OF VARIATION

The ratings of essay examinations are never entirely consistent of reliable. The ratings are subject to error or inconsistency from four sources (assuming conditions of administration are held constant):

1. The _writer_, whose performance on a particular occasion may be affected by his physical condition, his motivation, and his interest in or knowledge of the topic he is asked to write on.

2. Certain features of the essay itself; besides its "intrinsic" worth as a composition, an essay may be, to its author's detriment, illegibly handwritten, filled with ignorant or careless errors, or outrageous in its opinions.
3. The raters, who may become tired or bored or inattentive, and who may or may not have been adequately and effectively trained in the evaluation methodology being employed.
4. The topic or writing assignment, which may be clearly or ambiguously phrased, rich or poor in rhetorical possibilities, within or outside of the examinee's range of competence.

It is obvious that none of these four factors really operates independently. The writer's attitude and emotional state may be in part a function of the task he finds himself asked to perform. The quality of a topic cannot be established apart from the characteristics of the examinees who are asked to respond to it. The effectiveness of the training given to the raters is put to the test by essays that are written in a slovenly hand or that deal controversially with matters dear to the rater's heart. And so forth.

Writer Characteristics

Investigators in a number of psychological and sociological specialities have, over the years, interested themselves in the correlates and antecedents of good and poor writing performance. The literature is large and scattered over a wide variety of technical journals, and no attempt is made in the present essay to digest or synthesize the research. A sampling of the literature has not convinced us that the effort would be worth the while, given the rather narrow purposes of this project: namely, to provide a set of essay topics that will be fair and valid stimuli for certification candidates to write to. For the most part, the psychological and sociological researchers seem to put little more effort into selecting topics than do some of the quick-and-dirty evaluators we have already noticed. Their work establishes, it would seem on a first impression, that a respondent's writing performance may indeed be a function of his or her class background, educational background, and individual personality characteristics. Among the traits that have been studied are, of course, race (See the bibliographies in Janzen and Hallworth, 1973; and Schmidt, Berner, and Hunter, 1972), sex (the Janzen and Hallworth study just cited may be the only one in the literature that has found "no difference" between males and females), and social class (Bernstein, 1962). But other traits that have been studied include motivation (McClelland, 1973), "writing apprehension" (Daly and Shamo, 1976) and preference for speaking over writing (Davis and Taft, 1976). (This last study, interestingly, concludes that preference for speaking, which is associated with high oral competence, results from being skilled at speaking in the first place, so that speaking is socially reinforcing; preference for writing, on the contrary, is not associated with high competence in writing, but seems to stem, paradoxically, from poor oral competence and consequent lack of enjoyment of social intercourse.)

Everyone agrees, to the extent it no longer really needs to be documented, that variations in examination conditions can affect respondents in ways that will affect performance quality in writing and other sorts of tests, and any carefully constructed examination program will ensure uniformity of conditions as a matter of course. The same can be said about the quality of examination conditions: as much as possible, the examination room must be well-lighted, quiet, comfortable, free from distracting movement; the psychological environment must be businesslike, but positive and non-threatening. Work recently reported by Clark (1970) generalizes the latter conditions to the essay test instructions themselves, demonstrating that they can affect a student's anxiety level and willingness to write.

These studies are germane to our present purpose, really, only in that indirectly call attention to the importance of the topic in an essay test of writing skill. The studies have established that writing performance will differ predictably between groups, and within respondents from occasion to occasion. But the holistically-rated essay is a form of criterion-referenced examination; and once the criteria have been established and internalized by the raters, it would be a violation of the integrity of the rating process to give special consideration to a writer who, for example, obviously belongs to a disadvantaged minority, or speaks English as a second language, or (if the facts were known) tends to freeze in an examination situation, or feels ill (at least some students on most test administrations will append to their essay an explanation on the order of "I don't feel well today"), or has some other trait which may have been established as correlated with poor writing performance. This means that any accomodation of these traits must be made either in the process of selecting topics or in the deliberations about cut-off scores. But the cut-off point of a holistic essay examination establishes itself, in a manner of speaking, and is not subject to manipulation--if the raters agree an essay deserves the lowest possible score, which is by definition "unsatisfactory," there is no way to interpret or redefine that score as passing. (Examiners using an objectively-scored test, on the other hand, where the scores decrease in increments, can adjust the cut-off point so that the percentage of failures is realistically acceptable. This cannot be done with a pass-fail sort of grading scale, so that it is at least theoretically possible that the entire population taking an essay examination could either pass it or fail it.)

And that leaves the essay topic as the sole point where some provision can be made for the expected diversity of social, ethnic, and personality traits that may affect writing performance.

Essay Characteristics

The research on essay characteristics has tended to concentrate on the effects upon raters' judgments of poor handwriting and/or frequency and seriousness of mechanical and usage errors (e.g., Chase, 1966; Henderson, 1977; Klein and Hart, 1968; Marshall, 1967 and 1972; Marshall and Powers, 1969; Scannell and Marshall, 1966). The results of these studies are somewhat mixed, but it seems safe to say that raters can consistently be taught in the course of a good training program not to give these features undue importance. Much the same is probably true of extreme opinions (Freedman, 1977 and 1978), though it is undoubtedly discreet for examiners to assign topics which will not deliberately provoke arguments about politics and religion.

Rater Behavior

The literature on rater behavior and between-rater differences is voluminous. (See, for only a sample, Coffman, 1976; Cooper and Odell, 1977 and 1978; Diederich, French, and Carlton, 1961; Diederich, 1974; Ebel, 1965; Follman and Anderson, 1967; Freedman, 1977 and 1978; Godschalk, Swineford, and Coffman, 1966; Henderson, 1977; Hirsch, 1977; Huntley, Schmeiser, and Stiggins, 1979; Jerabek and Dieterich, 1975; Steele, 1978; and Stalnaker, 1951.) That raters can predictably be trained to holistically grade essays at high and acceptable levels of reliability is as firmly established as anything in the education literature-so firmly that the Courts (e.g., Whitfield v Illinois Board of Law Examiners, 1974) have laid down that there is no basis for relief for a failed examinee in the fact that an essay examination was scored subjectively.

The literature dealing with topic construction for examination purposes consists, unfortunately for present purposes, largely of precepts and reports of practices. In few instances has rigorous theory or systematically-gathered empirical evidence been brought to bear on questions related to topic selection. Most of the significant literature on topics in some way relates or refers to the work on essay testing done by the Educational Testing Service, the College Entrance Examination Board and the American College Testing program: and the fact that those organizations, after many years of grappling with the problems of evaluating writing ability through essay examinations, can offer little empirically-grounded guidance on essay construction gives some idea of the practical and conceptual difficulties surrounding the problem.

An uncertainty is additionally involved in applying the precepts of ETS, CEEB, ACT, and most other writers on the subject, since the great bulk of the work reported in the literature has been done with examinees considerably younger than those who will be taking the Teacher Competency

Examination and for purposes considerably different and--from the point of view of one seeking a certificate that will enable him to earn a living--less momentous.

The task of drawing sound guidance from this literature is not impossible, however, for it does in fact contain much good common sense and hard-earned practical expertise. It must be admitted at the start, though, that the literature will not yield procedures as firmly established as those governing the rating of essays; nor can it advance our understanding of the imponderables involved in topic construction to the point where "professional judgment" and field-testing of individual topics can be dispensed with.

QUESTIONS ABOUT TOPICS

The questions that have been asked about essay topics may be grouped under four headings, in the following fashion.

1. Source: how should topics be created? by whom? by what process should be quality, difficulty, and validity of topics be controlled?
2. Time: how long a period of time should examinees be given to compose their essays? what are the effects upon ratings of varying periods of time?
3. Options: should examinees be given a single set topic or a number of optional topics from which to choose?

4. Content and structure: to what extent should the elements of the rhetorical situation be specified? to what extent should the topic supply content for the essay? what sort of category of discourse should the topic elicit? what relationships are there between variations in the content and structure of topics and the quality of essays?

Some of the answers that have been offered to these questions will be surveyed in the following sections.

Source of Topics

The writing, editing, and selection of topics is, of course, a crucial step in the creation of a valid essay examination. A topic is intended, on the one hand, to give the examinee an occasion to write and ideally, also something interesting or motivating to write about. On the other hand, the topic is intended to limit and channel the examinee's choices, so that the resulting essay will exhibit the features the examiners are interested in evaluating. In an examination, for example, where the purpose is to determine how well the candidates can handle the conventions of the expository essay and of Edited American English, it would not do to have a topic so poorly phrased as to allow an examinee legitimately to respond by writing, say, a poem, a folksy personal narrative, or a short play in dialect. Contrarily, if an examiner is interested in an examinee's ability to express his feelings about some issue of personal significance, it would not do to have a topic so phrased as to allow the examinee to escape from the challenge by writing an impersonal, third-person consideration of the issue.

The complexity of any linguistic transaction is such that even the smallest alterations in the wording or punctuation of a topic may create all sorts of opportunities for new creative misreadings by examinees. Systematic attention to this elementary problem of communication between test-writer and examinee has taken place in regard to items on multiple choice objective examinations. (See Hoffman, 1963). Critics have found it easy to demonstrate that particular questions contain ambiguities or unintended possibilities for variant interpretations of such a nature that examinees--especially bright and verbally creative ones--may be led to interpret one of the intended distractors as actually a better quality answer than the purported "right" one.

The problem of constructing a fair and defensible essay topic is essentially the same as that of constructing a fair and defensible objective test item. In both cases, simply due to the nature of language and human communication, it is impossible to reduce the process to a simply mechanical one, in which good questions or topics can be generated by following a formula or recipe. The writing and editing of good questions or essay topics is a process that requires the sensitive judgment of experienced professionals, and it is so complex and slippery a process that the judgment of one expert or one small committee of experts is never enough. Good questions and good topics, that is to say, are, like poems, not written, but rewritten.

The construction of a good essay examination topic, it is to be emphasized, is not essentially a different or more "subjective" process than the construction of a good objective examination item. If anything, the essay topic requires even more care and attention, since the essay examination is essentially a one-question test.

The literature on essay examinations, however, shows that, at least until very recently, there has been a sharp difference of attitude between staff member of the national testing services and evaluators based in schools, universities, and state education department toward the importance and difficulty of essay topic construction. While the testing services (some of whose procedures will be examined below) have over the years devoted careful attention to topic development, the published reports from other sources show an attitude toward topic selection that is, to put it charitably, very casual.

Some studies on rater reliability have been conducted on sets of essays gathered from English instructors and contain no mention of the topic or topics on which the essay were written. Most report without further specification that students were asked to write on an assigned topic or on one of several assigned topics. A few recent examples:

Swanson (1975) simply asked his subjects to "elaborate on a subject of choice"; a report from the California State Department of Education (1977) notes in passing that students were randomly assigned "one of five topics"; a report from the Educational Research Institute of British Columbia (1977) specifies that students wrote on "five selected topics" prepared by a committee of three English professors; Duke (1974), in a report on a college testing program, presents several illustration of what look like imitations of the structured topics familiar from Scholastic Aptitude Tests, but says little about how the topics were written or validated.

Students taking the Georgia Regents writing examination are given the choice of writing on one of two topics, the pair of topics for each test form being chosen from a long list (Rentz, 1978) of alternative topics that are, it is to be assumed, intended to be functionally equivalent. There is, however, little explicit information in the extensive literature on the Georgia examinations on how the topics may have been created and validated, and even a quick inspection of the topics raises some serious questions about their quality and equivalency. These examinations will be discussed in some detail later on, as a rather typical example of current competency examinations.

The casual disregard for the communicative complexity of essay topics--even the seeming lack of curiosity about the problems involved--is, I would suggest, simply an extension into the areas of research and formal assessment of some traditional academic attitudes toward examinations. How one tests his or her students, after all, is an important aspect of one's teaching and is protected from critical examination both by the tradition of academic freedom and by the well-mannered assumption that any teacher or professor can write competent topics. The importance placed on the details of wording of essay topics has also been minimized by the fact that any teacher or professor can (as argued at the beginning of the paper) safely assume that his worthier students are sophisticated enough in the conventions of academic discourse that they will answer the question he wants them to answer, rather than the one he may have happened to ask.

This sort of attitude may cause few if any problems when the essay is used to measure subject matter mastery in a course of study. But it may lead to trouble when extended to a large-scale testing program. This is well illustrated in one of a series of reports that E. M. White (1974) has made on the California State University and College Freshman English Equivalency Examination. Students taking this examination each year are to write a ninety-minute essay on a set topic. A committee of English professors from the California system was charged with writing the topics, and the details were explicitly "left to the discretion of the Committee on English." (Proposed topics, according the White, were field-tested and "somewhat modified" by the same

Committee that created them in the first place.) When scores on the 1973 and 1974 administrations of the examination were found to differ significantly, a critical examination of the topics on the two examinations was undertaken and it was concluded that the topic on the 1974 examination--which called for some highly abstract reasoning--was manifestly more difficult than the 1973 question--which called for a reflection on a personal experience.

These between-topic differences cast doubts on the validity of a very expensive testing program, and White remarks, with nice understatement, "It is the intention of the directors...to give more thought, more attention, and more money to the development of essay questions" for future examination. (See, for comparison, White, 1977.)

In contrast to those who would prefer to believe that any English teacher or professor can turn out satisfactory topics on demand, the Educational Testing Service has long recognized the importance of topics and the difficulty of creating good ones that meet the particular needs of their various programs. Over the years ETS has developed a set of procedures for shaping the highly-structured sorts of questions for which they early-on developed a preference. The procedures essentially involve passing proposed questions through a series of conceptual and experiential filters that eventually, through a process of successive approximations, turn out topics that are, from year to year, functionally equivalent in the demands they make upon and the opportunities they offer to the examinees.

Here is how the topic specifications and the editing process are described in a handout which is given to readers of the Scholastic Aptitude Test:

> An essay topic used in a College Board English Composition Test must meet specification quite different from those for a topic used only in a classroom. It must be self-explanatory; it must be defined and limited. It must be topic that every student in the country can be expected to have some information about. It must be a topic so stimulating that every candidate will have something to say immediately. It must be a topic that young and inexperienced candidates can write about intelligently when they have only twenty minutes in a tense situation to produce their essays. It must not be a topic that calls forth merely a perfunctory presentation of cliches or a topic candidates are likely to have written about many times before. It must not be a topic that induces an emotional response on the part of a candidate, even as it must not be a topic that produces an emotional reaction on the part of the reader of the essay. The ability to write is what is to be evaluated, and everything that interferes with the evaluation must be eliminated or, at the

> very least, mitigated.
>
> As you can guess, the choice of topics is extremely difficult. One of the devices used to help the committee is pretesting.
>
> Each year, from the fifty or so topics submitted by committee members for consideration, the Committee of Examiners prepares about twenty essay topics for administration in pretest form to students in College Board member colleges throughout the country. A selected group of readers scores the essays and evaluates the topics: Are there both good papers and poor papers? Will readers be able to score the responses reliably? Are the responses boring to read? Does the topic allow the candidate to call upon other than an extremely personal background to provide specific examples? Is the topic limited enough? Is it structured enough? Can the candidate put to good use the short time he or she has for writing?
>
> On the basis of the readers' judgments, which are supplemented by statistical data, the Committee of Examiners chooses the topic for the test. (ETS, 1976)

This sort of procedure for developing topics may be represented as the state-of-the-art, and it is strongly recommended that some version of it be used to select and validate topics for the Teacher Competency Examination. The process recognizes the inherent subjectivity of the whole process and the fallability of any one expert's judgment, and it aims toward a consensus of experts, supported by the evidence of field tests and the criticisms of outside consultants, that a particular proposed item is appropriate to the purposes of a particular examination.

The American College Testing Program, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and various independent reseachers--whose work will be discussed in the later section on "Content and Structure"--have used similarly careful, multi-step approaches to developing quite different sorts of topics and topic-situations.

How much time should examinees be given to write the essay

Being able to write an impromptu essay that is coherent, effective, and free from mechanical disfigurations is a useful and even necessary skill--teachers writing reports to parents, executives writing business letters, and police officers writing their daily reports, for example, do not usually have the luxury of leisurely reflection and revision accorded the professional writer or even the student writng a paper within a generous time-frame. The ability to write well under pressure--to produce a credible first draft paper on demand--is a skill that is more likely to be developed, and associated with academic success, in some disciplines more than others. To speak specifically of candidates for teacher certification, students majoring in English, history, foreign languages or minoring in such areas as philosophy are almost certain to have had much more practice in turning out impromptu essays than are students in academic disciplines not so centrally involved with language--mathematics, science, physical education, elementary education, and so on. In some disciplines and in some universities, in fact, it seems possible for a teacher education student to perform credibly in his professional studies without writing at all--all evaluation being done, for "scientific" reasons, by means of objective examinations. It also seems very likely that students who are attracted into the essentially verbal disciplines such as English are those who are blessed in the first place with the verbal skills that will allow them to shine in an impromptu essay examination. (In preliminary work done on the writing examination at FSU in the fall of 1978, four English majors happened to be included in a sample of some 120 students who wrote essays: they received four of the five highest grades.) The point of these remarks is that the ability to write an impromptu essay is a special skill that is differentially practiced and differentially developed.

It seems reasonable, then, to proposed that the shorter the period of time allowed for the examinees to write, the greater the premium that will be placed on prior experience in impromptu writing and on native glibness. (The twenty minute essay currently being included in the College Boards language skills examinations has to be more a test of bull-throwing ability than writing ability.)

Consider further that the shorter the period of time allowed for the essay, the greater the contradiction between test conditions and those emphasized in contemporary rhetorical theory as essential to good writing. (In very brief, current theory insists that writing is not a matter of finding words for pre-existing ideas, but a process for discovering meaning; it therefore emphasizes the importance of time spent playing with language and ideas, and assumes that the first draft of a paper--the sort of thing turned out by a student in an impromptu situation--is only an early step on the way to a finished piece of writing.)

Good writing, according to most current authorities, is a matter of rewriting. Students taking the College Boards Advanced Placement tests in Literature are allowed three hours to complete an essay, and it is possible that within that time-frame something resembling real revision can take place. But such a time period is not practical nor--given the purposes of the Teacher Competency Examinations--necessary in the present case. What is called for is a time period generous enough for the competent but not unusually glib writer to think through the problem presented by the topic, compose a response to it, and re-read his composition several times for purposes of clarification and error correction.

How long will this take? For the most part, assessment programs in colleges and universities have given students (for obvious reasons) a class period--45 to 50 minutes--to write their essays. The classic study of writing evaluation by Godschalk, Swineford, and Coffman (1966) used five essays written by 646 students, each of the essays being of a supposedly different rhetorical type. The students were given forty minutes to write three of these essays, and (without explanation) twenty minutes to write the other two. A study conducted in connection with the Georgia Regents Program at Fort Valley College (1974) administered the essay examination, which was normally written under a forty-five minute time limit, without any time restrictions. Of the 161 students taking the test under these condition, 147 took more time than usually provided to complete their essays. (By the nature of the design it was not possible to say whether the additional time yield better ratings.) Another Georgia study compared essays written under four contrasting conditions:

30 minute time limit--no choice of topic
30 minute time limit--choice of topic
45 minute time limit--no choice of topic
45 minute time limit--choice of topic.

Only the thirty minute-choice of topic condition gave significantly inferior results (presumably because students spent too much of their time considering what to write about). "In general," the study concludes, "it seems that increasing time to 45 minutes may improve performance ; it is not clear whether 'choice' or 'no choice' would result in improvement" (Georgia Regents, 1977).

Still another Georgia study compared the holistic ratings given essays with analytical ratings given the same essays by raters following an intricate essay rating scale. The analyses concentrated on differences between essays rated "1" (failing) and "2" (minimally passing). The investigator concluded that "mechanical factors, including spelling, punctuation, and usage are not the principal reasons for failure on the essays. For level 1 (failing) essays, the scores on the three mechanical criteria are relatively high." Further analyses suggested that "a lack of time may be a contributing cause for both 1 and 2 essays," since the weakest elements in these low-scored essays had to do with paragraph structure development and thesis development. In conclusion, the study recommended that "the time allotted for writing the essay should be increased to not less than one hour." (Henderson, 1977, emphasis in original).

That is about the extent of the research on time allotments for essays. Testing practice, as noted already, centers on a forty-five to fifty minute period for school based testing programs. Programs such as the California English Equivalency Examinations seem to prefer a ninety minute period.

All things considered, this writer's recommendations would be that thirty minutes is too short for anything except showing off, an hour is just about right, and forty-five minutes is minimally acceptable.

Should there be one topic or optional topics?

There has been little research done on this aspect of essay examinations, but it would be fair to say that the weight of expert opinion comes down, with reservations, on the side of providing a single essay topic--in part, our friendly skeptic might infer, because the people who write essay topics think they are smarter than anyone else involved in the process. Certainly some authorities hesitate to give the student credit for any common sense at all. Meyer (1939), for example, argued that students should not be allowed options because they lack the ability to choose the option on which they will perform best. For some reason this canard has become part of the conventional wisdom on the subject, being repeated as late as 1976 by Mehrens, who goes on to add injury to insult by stating that there is general agreement that the provision of options may penalize the brighter students, who may choose the more difficult and complex topic and not be able to treat it adequately in the available time (Mehrens, 1976, p. 104).

A less condescending objection to options is that it is difficult to produce options that are of equal difficulty. But there is no basis for assuming that it is any easier to produce a single topic that will be fair to a large and diverse population of examinees.

To come at the problem another way: if a single topic is set, at least some of the examinees will find it unstimulating or outside their experience and will not write their best in response to it; if a number of options are provided, the resulting essays may range over a variety of literary types of modes and the rater may find themselves continually having to re-adjust their criteria to accomodate the rhetorical differences among essays. In either case, a possibly significant source of error is introduced into the examination process.

A Georgia Regents study (1977) of the interactions between time and options found that the provision of options had a deleterious effect only when a very short time period was allowed for writing the essay. Another study, Du Cette and Wolk (1976), compared the performances of 187 college students who were given a single topic and an optional topic mid-term examination in an educational psychology course. They found that "The Ss given the optional examination achieved significantly poorer scores than Ss not given options" (p. 104). The investigators offer little to explain why this may have been the case and conclude cautiously that, while giving options on a teacher-made, subjectcentered examination produced poorer test performance, "this does not necessarily mean that with another type of test, giving options would not produce the opposite result" (p. 110).

Gronlund's chapter on essay tests, in his widely-used Constructing Achievement Tests (1977), argues, on the basis of the available evidence and professional judgment, against the provision of options, but concedes that

> in some special situation, the use of optional questions may be defensible. For example, if the essay is to be used as a measure of writing skill only, some choice of topics on which to write may be desirable" (p. 72, emphasis in original).

All of which is not awfully helpful in deciding whether the Teacher Competency Examination should provide one topic or several optional topics. It does seem safe, however, to assert that the weight of opinion among composition teachers is in favor of providing many options for the sake of fairness to the examinees, while the consensus among professional testers is for the single topic, for the sake of higher reliability among the raters. The College Board and the Educational Testing Service long ago settled on a solution to the dilemma that seems to serve their purposes well. Students taking one of the ETS examinations that call for the production of a writing sample will be given a single topic, but one so elaborately structured as to give all examinee something in common to write about, thereby minimizing difference in knowledge and background among the examinees.

McColly (1970), in his review of the research on the evaluation of writing ability, raises some important questions about single-topic examinations of this sort.[4]

> Because examiners have long believed that freedom of response lowers the validity and reliability of test essays, the writing test topic is traditionally quite highly structured. The principle which underlies this approach to topics seems to be that if all the writers are given something to say, the effects of knowledge as such will be held more constant than otherwise from writer to writer, and genuine variability due to differences in writing ability will more clearly emerge (McColly, 1970, p. 152).

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[4] McColly also raises the question of whether one sample of writing is an adequate base upon which to found a judgment of an examinee's writing ability. He notes Diederich's considered opinion that even two themes are "totally inadequate," and remarks that "if a topic is absolutely valid then a sample of one topic is sufficient provided that other sources of error...are removed." Therefore, "the matter of topic validity is perhaps more essential than any other aspect of essay testing in relation to research," but "so far there has been none conducted" (p. 152).

McColly then supplies this example of a structured ETS-type topic which calls on the examinee to write about societal conventions.[5]

> Conventional is a word frequently used to refer to customary attitudes, beliefs, or actions. In the United States it is a convention for men to be clean-shaven, women to wear a certain amount of make-up, boys to be interested in sports, and girls to be interested in becoming wives and mothers. A person who is unconventional in some ways departs from the conventions of action or belief of the society of which he is a part. With this explanation in mind, discuss the following statement: "Convention is society's safeguard, but also its potential

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[5] Very significantly, the conventions put forth as examples have, in a few short years, become non-conventions, thereby largely invalidating the topic. The moral here seems to be that it is not possible to work up a collection of topics once and for all and then sample from the collection for subsequent administrations of the test. New topics will have to be written--or old ones re-validated--periodically.

> executioner."[6] To what extent and in what ways do you agree with this statement? Use examples and details from your knowledge and experience to support your conclusion.

When compared to a wide-open topic such as, "Discuss conventionality," such a structured topic certainly does succeed in filtering out of some extent the effects of differences between examinees in knowledge and information.

> On the other hand, it seems clear...that in giving all students a basic content, and asking them in effect to make something of it, the examination task becomes really a task in logic more than one in pure writing...The topic says to the student, you have been given an explanation of conventionality, you have certain ideas and attitudes toward conventionality based on your knowledge and experience, and you have been given a metaphorical maxim about conventionality, now put these elements together as discourse containing a proposition and a proof.

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[6] The sterile pomposity of the proffered quotation, by the way, seems all too typical of topics of this sort, perhaps encouraging an answering and artificial pomposity from the examinee. Our skeptic would suspect that the intention of some examination writers has been to elicit the use of an elevated and "literary" persona to help distinguish the deserving examinee from his more plebian rivals.

> The view taken here is that for a writing-test topic to be valid, it should have the property of filtering out not only differences ascribable to knowledge, but also those arising from fluency in logical operations (McColly, 1970, pp. 152-53).

Topics which are designed to do this latter thing however--McColly used as an example a topic asking whether the examinee agrees that "The best things in life are free"--often raise another sort of problem: it is impossible for the intelligent student to try to deal with such a question "without saying in effect that the idea is so trite and meaningless as to be incapable of any kind of treatment" (McColly, 1970, p. 153).

One would also have to pity the rater who found himself having to spend several days reading essay after essay written to either the "conventionality" topic or the even more simple-minded "best things" one. The Educational Testing Service, despite its dedication to the single topic as the best approach to a writing test, is aware of the possibility of rater boredom as a threat to reliability. A sheet of criteria circulated to the editors of proposed ETS essay topics asks them to consider whether they would "be willing to read essays on this topic for several days in succession?" (Conlan, 1979).

The single set topic, on the positive side, may reduce between-examinee differences in information by supplying content and various clues for handling it; this measure of control over the essays by the topic will, in turn, reduce the rhetorical variety of the essays and make it easier for the raters consistently to sapply a single set of standards. On the negative side, the single essay topic will almost surely leave a certain number of examinees scrambling for something to say about a subject that is unfamiliar and uninteresting to them; in addition, the control over the form and content of the essays exercised by the topic may so reduce the literary range of the essays as to encourage rater boredom and inattention.

The provision of optional topics, on the positive side, increases the chances each examinee will find one upon which he has something to say (and something he wants to say); in turn, the more personal and unpredictable nature of the essays should make it easier for the raters to give each essay fresh attention. On the negative side, it is extremely difficult to provide a set of topics that are equivalent in difficulty and compositional opportunities--and there will not be time enough for an examinee who discovers he has mistakenly chosen a poor topic to go back and correct his mis-step; in addition, the same variety of response that encourages rater attention, may simultaneously create confusion in the application of standards.

The obvious solution to these contradictions seems to be to create topics that combine the strengths of the two approaches while minimizing the shortcomings of each. One way of doing this would be to devise a single and rather elaborate and structured set of instructions for the essay itself (in order to provide enough rhetorical uniformity to make ratings consistent), while at the same time supplying a set of options as to essay content. If the instructions are well-written and the topic-contents carefully selected as suitable to the examinees' common backgrounds, this should increase the chances of everyone's finding a congenial topic and decrease rater boredom with overly-similar essays.

TYPES OF STRUCTURE AND CONTENT OF ESSAY TOPICS

Thoughful writers of essay topics have gone about their jobs in different ways, according to their different purposes. There is no standard terminology for describing the differences between the different sorts of essay topics that have been produced, so terms will have to be invented, according to the amount of subject matter content supplied and the kind or amount of structure supplied. Five combinations of content and structure producing five sorts of essay topics may be identified, although they of course overlap and fade into one another.

1. Abstraction-centered. The first sort of topic--and by all odds the commonest--may be characterized as having two separate parts--(1) a set of instructions, consisting of abstract and sometimes arbitrary injunctions about how the writer is to proceed and (2) a question upon which

to proceed. In all the instances that have turned up in the literature, there are several optional questions. This is the sort of topic that has been used in the Georgia Regents Examinations, and is common in home-made college English placement tests.

2. Content-centered. The second sort of topic, perfected by the Educational Testing Service, has already been discussed. Its usual form includes an abstract disquisition on some mildly controversial state of affairs, a striking or paradoxical quotation epitomizing the issue, and instructions to the writer to look to his own experiences and write an essay expressing his own position on the case. The emphasis here is on the content, and part of the test is to determine whether the examinee is a good enough scholar to find a form and voice appropriate to the argument and the occasion.

3. Role-centered. An original approach to eliciting sample essays is under development by the American College Testing Program. The content is presented by way of tape recordings, and the instructions call upon the examinee to play a specified role and to write, in that role, a communication intended to achieve some specific purpose connected with the content that has been

presented.

4. Audience-centered. The topics that have been developed by the National Assessment of Educational Progress differ from the foregoing in that they are designed not for holistic, but for primary-trait scoring. That is to say, in each case the raters will be looking specifically for the presence or absence or traits or features that have been identified as crucial to the particular kind of discourse being produced. The topic here is essentially a simulation of a social situation and the examinee is directed to write a communication to a particular specified audience for a particular purpose.

5. Student-centered. In its various forms, this approach uses a structure resembling a programmed textbook for the purposes of (a) allaying student anxiety and (b) leading the student through the writing of a well-constructed essay by supplying him, not with content and a statement of purpose, but with e.g., a topic sentence, transitions, and suggestions for a conclusion. (Clark, 1979.)

Each of these sorts of topics except the last--which strikes us more as a valuable teaching method than as a useful method for evaluating adult writing ability--will be discussed below in more detail, in an effort to see what the differing methodologies may be able to contribute to the decisions that have to be made about the topics for the Teacher Competency Examination.

The Abstraction-Centered Topic

Examinations of this sort seem rarely to show any signs of having received much critical attention. Maybe what is basically wrong is that a test of abstraction-centered topics is so easy to write.

Figure 1 reproduces the essay examination given students taking the Georgia Regents Examination. It is a good specimen of the type. Note that the emphasis in the instructions is on (1) the administrative details of the task and (2) the abstract specifications of a good essay (or, rather, the process of producing such an essay). Actually, the advice under heading 2 is an indirect way of informing the examinee about the points on which his or her essay will be evaluated. Our skeptic would object that the examinees have heard all this before--if they understand what such abstractions as "organization," "central idea," and "topic sentence" mean, they do not need the advice; if they do not know what the terms mean, it is too late for the advice to do any good now. Similarly, since no one deliberately makes "serious errors in diction, sentence structure, and paragraph development," what earthly good is served by advice to avoid them?

....

Insert Figure 1 Here

....

The instructions bear all the marks of the harried English professor assigned to write an examination he has no interest in. The questions, too--that are to provide the examinees with their content--seem to have been given singularly little thought. Consider just these two samples (included in Rentz, 1978).

> 15. Do you favor or oppose the goals of the women's liberation movement in the United States? Why?
>
> 16. Is too much emphasis placed on grades in our education system? Explain.

First, our skeptic would ask, what is the difference between "Why?" and "Explain"? Is an examinee supposed to do different things in response to these two lexically distinct injunctions? If so, what? Second, is there a reason why topic 15 is phrased so as to invite a personal response and 16 phrased so as to call for an objective consideration of the problem? Third, is the examinee supposed to take literally the specification in topic 15 that one must either "favor or oppose" the women's liberation movement? (And is that phrase actually neutral, or is it perhaps emotionally loaded in a way that "women's movement," is not?) Fourth, does the terms "explain" in topic 16 explicitly commit the

FIGURE 1

LANGUAGE SKILLS EXAM
ESSAY
(45 Minutes)

General Directions: The purpose of this test is to find out how well you can write an essay. You have a choice between two topics. Having read the short statements or questions which tell you what each topic is about, decide which you prefer and mark an "X" in the box which follows that topic statement or question. You will, of course, choose the topic on which you feel you can do your best writing. You should first organize what you want to write; then begin writing on the first lined page.

Listed below, along with some information, are a few suggestions which will help you do your best on the essay.

1. Start planning your paper as soon as you have decided on your essay topic. You may use the space underneath the topics for making an outline or notes about your plans.

2. Organization of your essay is important. Think toward a good topic sentence, some specific supporting points, and a definite conclusion. In general, the passing essay will require that you (1) state and develop a central idea; (2) have an organization which is indicative of an overall plan; (3) deal with the assigned topic; and (4) avoid serious errors in diction, sentence structure, and paragraph development. Overall, what you say and how effectively you say it are more important than such mechanical factors as punctuation and spelling. You should spend most of your time getting your ideas written down in a clear, well-organized form.

3. Allow yourself a little time at the end of your writing to check your paper and make any needed changes. Watch your handwriting, as an evaluator must be able to read your paper.

4. Your paper will be read and evaluated by three different readers. Neither your identity nor your school will be known to the readers.

Choose one of the following; put an "X" in the box to indicate your choice.

ESSAY TOPIC 13:

Name someone you consider to be a modern hero or heroine and explain why you so classify the person. ☐

ESSAY TOPIC 14:

Do college students benefit from participation in extracurricular activities? Explain. ☐

Use space below for outline or notes.

examinee to the either/or position implied in the topic? And so forth.

All the topics in the list, which is a mixed bag of statements, questions, if/then situations, and invitations to personal narrative, can be (and should have been, much earlier) subjected to the same sort of critical questioning. But there is no purpose. The Georgia examination topics are almost pure examples of the sort satirized at the beginning of this paper--where the whole responsibility for the exercise of critical intelligence is thrown off on the student in the expectation that the good students will answer the question the professor would have asked if he had not been so busy with other things.

Florida examiners have little to learn here. But let it be said, in fairness, that the research literature does not enable one to assert, on evidence, that essays written on slipshod topics such as these will necessarily be of lower quality than those written on the most thoughtfully constructed topics.

The Content-Centered Topics

The sort of content-essay loaded topic favored by Educational Testing Service for College Board tests work admirably for its purpose, which is primarily to contribute to the power of a battery of tests to predict success in college. The even more elaborately structured examination questions on the Advanced Placement tests and those suggested in the College Board's End-of-the-Year Examinations in English (1965) are explicitly intended to identify students with outstanding critical intelligence, a large fund of knowledge, and high verbal facility. They, too, work admirably for their purpose. But these purposes have little in common with the present one of establishing minimal standards of written literacy for teachers. One problem is that is would be almost impossible to devise a single SAT-type question that could possibly be fair to an adult population as diverse in age, background, interest, intelligence, and experience as that which will be taking the Teacher Competency Examination. A further problem is that the ETS-type question does not create a situation for "real" writing; and an adult is likely both to be more intolerant of academic exercises and less inclined to take them seriously than younger students.

The Role-Centered Topics

A project now underway at the American College Testing Service involves an innovative approach to topic-making, and it is of particular interest in the present context because it is specifically addressed to assessing the writing proficiency of college graduates. "Since 1976," writes Joe Steele in an unpublished paper delivered at the 1979 NCME meeting, "the College Outcome Measures Project (COMP)...has been developing college exit measures that use realistic tasks to measure applied general education skills."

> One component of the COMP/ACT Assessment materials is a measure of writing proficiency...The COMP/ACT Writing Assessment is composed of three role-playing tasks using audio-taped stimuli in the content areas of social sciences, natural science, and the arts, which require a total of 60 minutes of writing to compose three written communications directed to various audiences. For each task, respondents have twenty minutes in which to prepare their written communication to specified audiences. In Task 1, the respondent listens to a taped group discussion of "Residential Family" and then writes a personal letter to a relative that explains and reflects on an invitation to join this 'family.' In Task 2, the respondent listens to a taped newscast on the energy shortage and then writes a persuasive letter to the editor of a local newspaper reacting to the newscast....In Task 3, the respondent listens to a tape of two types of music and then writes a memorandum to an employer endorsing one type of background music appropriate to the firm's waiting room. (pp. 1-2)

The essays are holistically rated, but according to a set of criteria or guidelines, the overriding concern of which "is the degree to which the response represents effective writing for an adult engaged in this social role" (p. 2). A problem with the validity of most writing tests, Steels continues,

> has to do with the nature and design of the writing tasks themselves. One feature which measures of writing have often lacked in the past has been a standardized task. For example, respondents have sometimes been asked to select a topic, such as 'My summer vacation,' from a list of topics. The context, other than a broad general topic, is entirely defined by the respondent. Such an approach introduces considerable variation into the nature of the response and makes comparisons of student performance difficult. Moreover, the task is not realistic. It does not deal with a situation an adult normally would respond to in writing, is not directed to any audience other than the evaluator, and does not set forth a purpose or outcome the communication should achieve.
>
> COMP has taken a different approach. Rather than selecting a topic that draws on one's private fund of experience, the respondent is asked to play a specific role likely to be encountered by adults. Relevant details are provided as a context in which to respond...The content needed to respond is information the generally educated college graduate might be expected to know (pp. 2-

3).

The remainder of Steele's paper recounts a series of studies of the validity and reliability of these assessment procedures--the results of which are impressive given the fact the instruments are still in a developmental stage.

At the moment, I simply have no further information on these COMP/ACT tests. I would like, for example, to hear the tapes and to establish if the dramatizations and music that can be presented on the tapes are an essential or incidental part of the method. Do the tapes, for example, increase student motivation or are they just a novelty? Could the same results be obtained from presenting students with the scripts of the "family" discussion or the newscast? I would also like more information about Steel's claim that three ratings of a paper have given only marginally higher reliability than two ratings (p. 5), for this is in contradiction of almost all other studies of the matter (see e.g., Diederich, 1974). Is it possible that the controls exerted over writer performance by the role-playing aspect of the situation or, possibly, the focussed guidelines, somehow contribute to a clearer definition of the rater's task and therefore to greater rater consistency?

Even without additional information, it is clear that the COMP/ACT approach is in line with on-going scholarship on the composing act, and that the purposes for which the tests were developed closely resemble those of the Florida Teacher Competency Examination.

The Audience-Centered Topics

The National Assessment of Educational Progress has also been concerned with providing its respondents not simply with topics, but with situations that will motivate them to do the sorts of purposeful writing people do in real life. The NAEP effort, according to Mullis (1977), was to create carefully constructed testing situations which would provide "opportunities for respondents to demonstrate their ability to choose and effectively carry out appropriate rhetorical strategies" (pp. 5-6). Different situations are designed to elicit persuasive, explanatory, and expressive (or creative) writing. A typical situation, for example, might involve the respondent in writing a letter explaining his qualifications for a particular job. The letter would then be primary-trait scored "on its likelihood of achieving the desired effect" (p. 5).

Each respondent is given a specified situation (no options) which includes a description of the role he is to take, the audience he is to address, and the subject matter he is to write on. The situation, in addition, "must stimulate students to write--and not only that, but to write as well as they can....So each task must be very carefully developed so that it is a realistic and interesting measure of the skill as well as a specific measure of the skill" (Mullis, 1977, p. 9; see also Mullis, 1976). Mullis acknowledges that "with a national sample, it is difficult to identify universally applicable situations," (Mullis, 1977, p. 9).

According to Richard Lloyd-Jones, who was largely responsible for perfecting the NAEP writing topics, while

> the methods perfected by ETS assume that excellence in one mode of writing predicts excellence in other modes--that is, good writing is good writing....the Primary Trait System developed under the auspices of NAEP assumes that the writer of a good technical report may not be able to produce an excellent persuasive letter to a city council....The goal of Primary Trait Scoring is to define precisely what segments of discourse will be evaluated....and to train readers to render holistic judgments accordingly.
>
> The chief steps in using the Primary Trait Scoring System are to define the universe of discourse, to devise exercises which sample that universe precisely, to ensure cooperation of the writers, to devise workable scoring guides, and to use the guides (Lloyd-Jones, 1977, p. 37).

The recommendations to be made finally about topics for the Teacher Competency Examination will owe a good deal to Lloyd-Jones' work, although for reasons to be explained later, his approach to holistic rating will not be recommended.

WHERE HAVE WE GOTTEN TO SO FAR?

Let us pause for a moment to review what has been established, on the somewhat rambling way to this point, about what should be **true** of good essay topics prepared for competency examinations. Then let us move on to ask more specifically what additional things should be true of good topics offered to prospective teachers to write upon.

1. On a competency examination it is more important for the topic to be one that allows for a reliable distinction between low and middling levels of competence than for an identification of exceptional merit; this means, in practice, that the topic need not in itself be complex or of many parts.
2. The precise details of the topic may be less important when the essay is used as a measure of general writing ability that when it is used as a measure of the examinee's knowledge or skill at using knowledge. This is because, as Hirsch (1977) points out, the "intrinsic quality" of a writer's presentation--which is what a holistic rating attends to--will vary much less from topic to topic that will the quality of a writer's information and ideas, which a critical-analytical approach would attend to.
3. On a competency examination what is to be evaluated is one's ability to express himself adequately and appropriately. Therefore, the topic must be one on which all respondents can

reasonably be assumed to have something to say. To put it another way, the topic should not demand specialized knowledge--of subject matter, social conventions, or academic conventions--that cannot reasonably be assumed to be common to all examinees.

4. The good topic will be clear and explicit in its phrasing, so that the competence examination does not inadvertently become a test of how well respondents are able to read between the lines and puzzle out what the examiners intended.

5. Since it seems very possible that people write unequally well in different modes and on different subjects, it is advisable that the topic on a teacher competency examination call upon the respondents to write an essay of a nature that is in some way clearly pertinent to teachers's job--this may, in fact, be a legal necessity, on the basis of the oft-affirmed principle that to be allowable as nondiscriminatory an examination must measure the person for the job, and not the person as a person. (This is discussed in the appendix essay.)

6. A good topic is rewritten, not written. Proposed topics must not only be subjected to critical analysis, they must be tried out on students like those who are to be examined, and the essays analyzed for evidence on which to

discard, retain, or revise the topics.

7. Since a very short time limit in which to write an essay benefits mainly the glib and the sophisticated, and since the central problem in competency testing is to distinguish between students with moderate and low levels of proficiency, and since both these latter classes of students are unlikely to be able to express themselves with ease and alacrity, sufficient time must be allowed for the moderately proficient student to complete the job in his best form. Forty-five minutes would seem to be indicated as the minimum acceptable period, with an hour to be preferred.

8. For a number of good psychometric reasons, the single topic set for all respondents is preferred by test makers; with a large and diverse body of respondents, however, there are equally compelling reasons for offering the examinees a number of options on which to write. A good topic should somehow manage to balance these two sets of demands, preserving as much as possible the reliability advantages of the single topic and the fairness of optional topics.

9. The good topic will, similarly, achieve a balance between being too open-ended to provide necessary guidance, and being so highly structured

as to become an exercise in logic, direction-following or paraphrasing.

10. Four broad categories of topics have been identified. Although there is no hard evidence that better essays will consistently be produced in response to one or another type, the abstraction-centered topic has been rejected as unhelpful to the writer and as measuring something other than writing skill per se. The content-centered, ETS-type topic has, similarly, been rejected as inappropriate to the purposes of the Teacher Competency Examination. A clear preference has been expressed for the sort of topic, developed in differing forms by ACT and NAEP, which provides a simulation of a real-life writing situation.

HOW SHALL TYPES OF DISCOURSE BE CATEGORIZED?

One reason that the topic is important is that it controls, at least to the extent that an examinee writes to the topic, the sort of discourse the examinee produces. The sort of discourse that is produced is, in turn, important because there seems to be good reason to believe that most writers are not equally skillful at writing, say, a technical report, a business letter, or a short story. That is to say, one's ability to write a good personal narrative may not tell examiners much about his or her ability to deal objectively with some abstract topic.

In order to deal with this state of affairs, a test-maker must devise some way to categorize the different sorts of discourse that a writer may produce. The old text-book division of types of writing into narration, description, argument, and persuasion has not proven to be very useful in teaching writing, and it is not useful at all to the test-maker, because the distinctions are not clean ones.

Of more usefulness is Jimmy Britton's distinction between "spectator" and "participant" writing. (See Britton, 1978, and Britton, Burgess, Martin, McLeod, and Rosen, 1975.) Participant writing is "writing to get things done,"

> whether it be in an operative mode of informing, instructing, of persuading people or in an intellectual mode of problem solving, speculating, theorizing. An utterance in this category is a means to some end outside itself, and its organization will be on the principle of efficiency in carrying out that end (Britton, 1978, p. 18).

Spectator writing involves the utterance itself as the focus of attention, the utterance "becoming an end rather than a means to something outside itself."

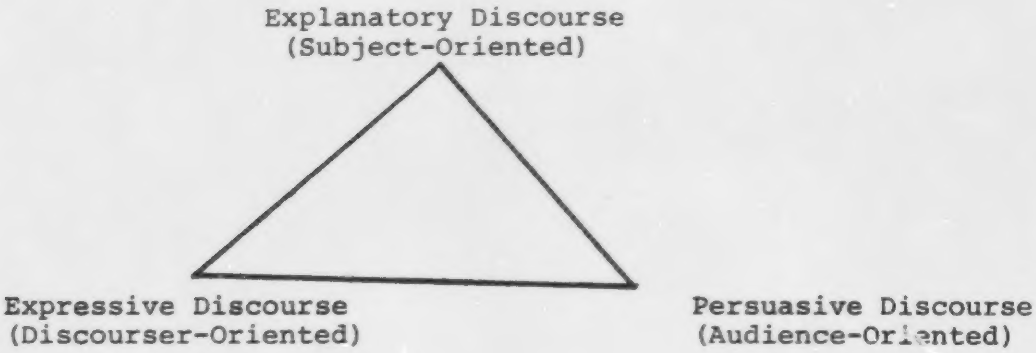
> As such an utterance moves up the scale from

> expressive to poetic, there is increasing stress upon the forms of the language itself and upon the formal disposition of whatever the language portrays-the pattern of events in a story, the patterns of feelings aroused, the movement of thought in a philosophical narrative....At the poetic end of the scale, then, a piece of writing is a verbal object, an artifact in words, a work of art; its organization is not on the principle of efficiency as a means, but on the coherence and unity achieved when every part is appropriate to each other and to the whole design (Britton, 1978, pp. 19-20).

Britton's distinctions allow us to propose that a writer's ability to write a credible critical reading of someone else's poem gives us no grounds for predicting that the same writer is equally able to produce an excellent poem of his own. But, and here is the point, this fact is not necessarily of any relevance in a particular case. To be more specific: It can be established (and will be, later) that a teacher candidate's ability to compose in certain participant modes (we need not get into the subcategories of Britton's system here) is directly pertinent to the performance of his or her professional duties; but it cannot be similarly established that a candidate's competence in spectator modes--the confession, say, or the short story, or the lyric--is related to his or her ability to carry out an educator's duties. Both the ACT and NAEP projects that have been discussed above were undertaken to obtain a rounded portrait of educational outcomes; for their purposes, it was necessary to obtain samples of both spectator and participant writings. The intention of the Teacher Competency Examination writing subtest, on the contrary, is to obtain an estimate of an examinee's ability to do the sorts of writing he will have to do in his role as a teacher. In composing topics for the Examination, therefore, there is no need to be concerned with the fact that there is no necessary relationships between one's competence in spectator and participant modes of writing. This gives us still another reason to be content with a single sample of an examinee's writing as adequate for Competency Examination purposes.

Perhaps equally as influential as Britton's work in its impact on current research in rhetoric and compostion is James Kinneavy's A Theory of Discourse (1971). Kinneavy distinguishes among four sorts of discourse according to the writer's aim or purpose. Writing, according to his scheme, may be persuasive, explanatory, self-expresive, or literary. Roughly, first two of these seem to correspond to Britton's participant writing and the latter two to his spectator writing.

In the first chapter of his famous study of romanticism, The Mirror and the Lamp, M. H. Abrams distinguished among four types of literary criticism according to whether they were primarily concerned with one or another of the elements of the literary work: the text itself as a verbal artifact, the author, the audience, or the "universe" of the work. Taking a similar approach in his work for the NAEP, Lloyd-Jones reduced Abram's types to three by eliminating the element of concern for the "universe" of the work--that is to say, for its "meaning" or philosophical validity, which is explicitly not of central concern when a writing sample is being holistically rated for its quality. Lloyd-Jones' offered this model of types of discourse specifically of importance in an examination of writing ability (Lloyd-Jones, 1977, p. 39).



Even more useful to our present purposes is a model which Lloyd-Jones presents in the same essay, but which he and his co-workers rejected as unnecessarily complicated for their purposes. It combines Britton's distinctions between participant and spectator writing with Kinneavy's distinctions of the four aims of discourse in an ingenious fashion. Figure 2 is an adaptation of Lloyd-Jones' model.

....

Insert Figure 2 Here

....

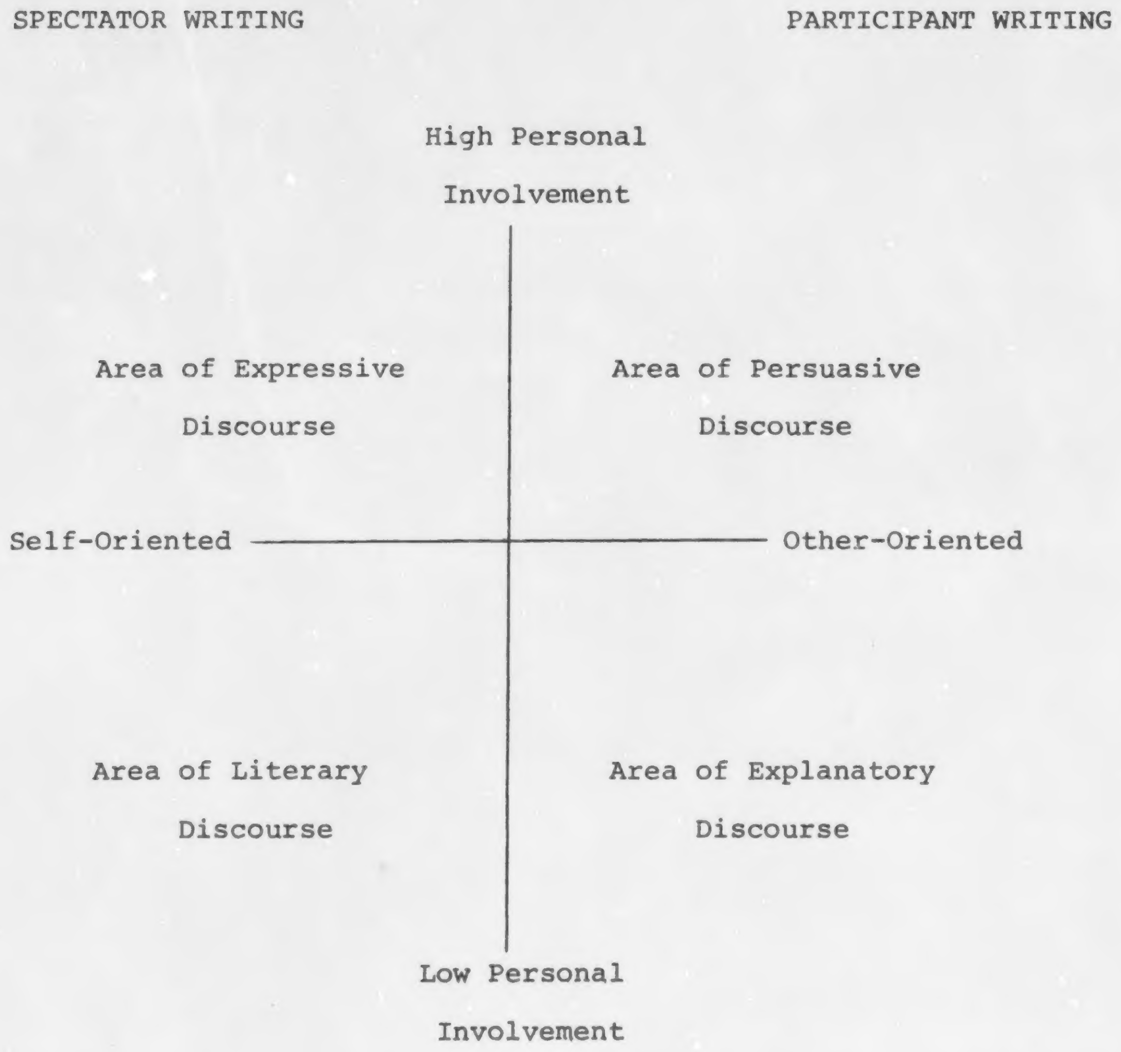
Any piece of writing may theoretically be located according to its position along the two axes of Personal Involvement (from total involvement to no involvement whatsoever) and Orientation (from the absolutely private as in a personal diary or a poem consisting entirely of private references, to complete concern for the reader's needs, as in a technical manual accompanying a piece of machinery). The labels (borrowed from Kinneavy) attached to the four quadrants are meant to indicate the primary tendency of a piece of writing that would be located in particular quadrant. This model will enable us to take the next step, which is asking, Where in the model can we locate the sorts of discourse that are pertinent to a teacher's professional duties?

WHAT DO TEACHERS REALLY NEED TO WRITE?

Any piece of writing and any writing assignment may be analyzed according to its audience, its subject, its purpose,

FIGURE 2

A Model of the Categories
of Discourse
(Adapted from Lloyd-Jones, 1977)


SPECTATOR WRITING
PARTICIPANT WRITING
High Personal Involvement
Area of Expressive Discourse
Area of Persuasive Discourse
Self-Oriented
Other-Oriented
Area of Literary Discourse
Area of Explanatory Discourse
Low Personal Involvement

and the "speaking voice" or persona its author should or must assume. Let us consider audience first. An informal poll of teachers enrolled in summer classes at FSU confirmed what a moment's reflection would probably suggest. The audience a teacher most often addresses in writing, at least beyond the early grades, is the class of students. Most teachers, during the course of a year, do a lot of writing on the blackboard and distribute a great many ditto and xerox copies of their own prose--in the form of teacher-made test and exercises, introductory explanations of units about to be undertaken, background materials of various sorts, "lecture notes" the students are intended to retain in their notebooks, and so on. Writing skill is obviously of importance here, for the teacher who cannot, for example, write clear directions will both frustrate his or her students and damage his or her authority. Another important audience which all teachers must at some time address in writing is the parent. And there is no possible worse occurence, from a public relations point of view, than for the letter-to-the-editor column to reproduce teacher memoranda filled with misspellings and grammatical errors. Most teachers will also at some point, though usually infrequently, communicate in writing with their principal--not least importantly in their job applications--their school counselor, or perhaps the local PTA. A minority of teachers will at some time be assigned to write to "outsiders," preparing, for example, a description of the curriculum for the school board, or a statement of school "philosophy", or a departmental self-report for an evaluation team. An even smaller minority of teachers will choose to address a general audience in essays intended for publication.

The subjects on which teachers are most likely to write in a professional role are probably (1) the behavior or accomplishments of individual student, (2) the behavior or accomplishments of groups or classes of students, (3) programs and teaching conditions, (4) the teacher's own professional actions or opinions.

The purposes of most teacher writing are likely to be either explanatory (as in a memorandum to a principal explaining why a particular recommendation was made about a student's promotion or expulsion) or persuasive (as in a letter to a parent urging that a son or daughter be allowed to participate in a certain activity). There will be little or no occasion for a teacher to engage in spectator or expressive writing in his or her professional role.

In like wise, the speaking voice that is appropriate to most professional communications will indicate neither extreme self-involvement nor extreme objectivity. A middle range--of professional distance coupled with personal concern--will usually be appropriate, with all this implies about choices of diction, syntax, vocabulary, and so on. In general, the acceptable range for teacher communications falls within a sort of middle register--standard and somewhat formal in level of usage, but not pedantic or oratorical;

eschewing both excessive slang and educational jargon. (The sort of expository discourse that is, in fact, described in the Criteria for Raters contained in the Writing Examination Handbook prepared for the Teacher Competency Examination.)

We can now specify that the sorts of discourse that are professionally most relevant to all teachers are those that fall within the area enclosed by the dotted box in Figure 3.

....

Insert Figure 3 Here

....

The area, it will be noticed, is entirely within the category of participant writing, and more specifically, it defines types of writing characterized by moderate self-involvement and moderate other-orientation.

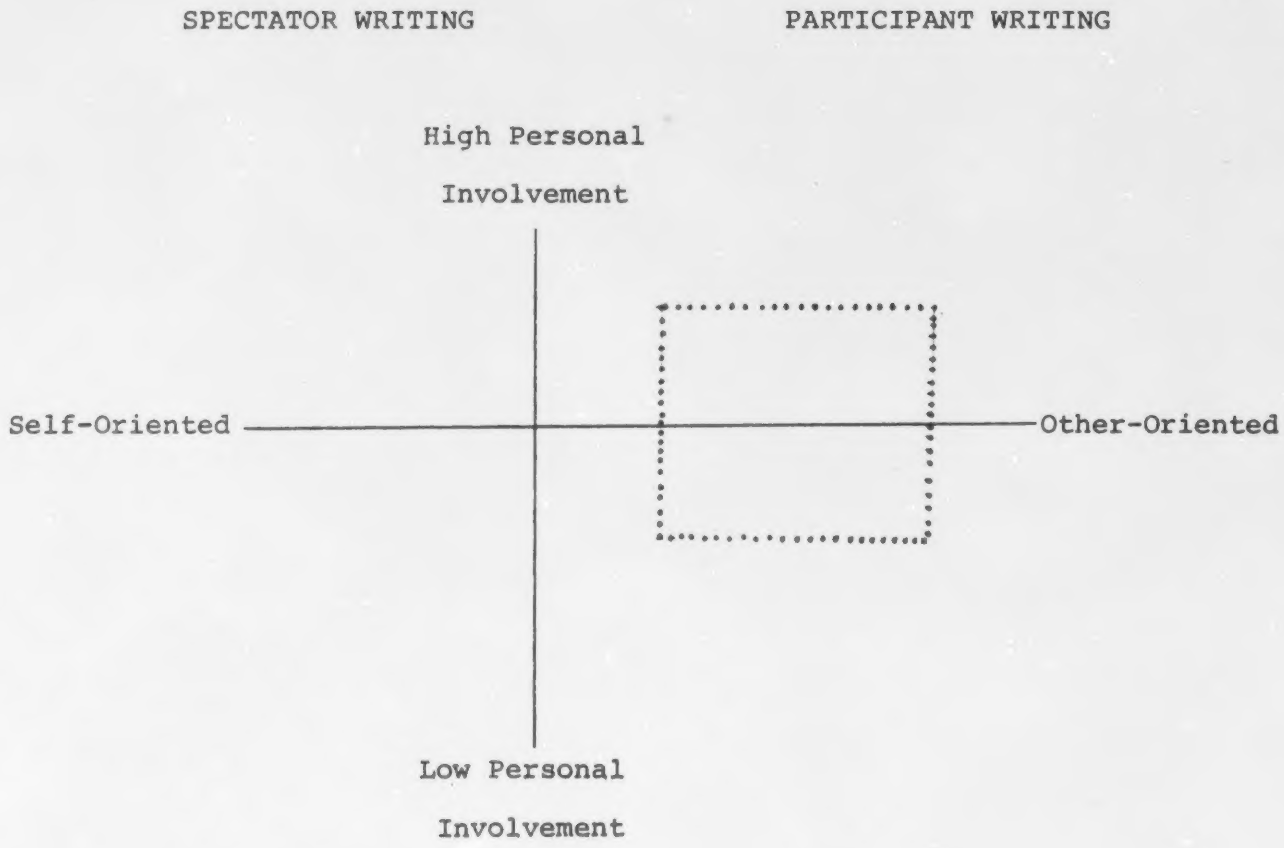
If the reasoning to this point is acceptable, then it can be argued that an examination topic which calls for teacher candidates to perform in writing within the range of options described by the boxed area in Figure 3 has face validity--that is, such a topic is self-evidently related to the demands of the teaching profession.

WHAT WILL BE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A VALID TOPIC FOR TEACHERS?

It is generally agreed that if a writing assignment is to produce a piece of writing of a particular desired sort, then the assignment must inform the writer of the specification of that sort of writing. Sanders and Littlefield (1975) argue that a valid writing task must provide "a full rhetorical

FIGURE 3

The area enclosed by the dotted box designated the "space" within which most professional written communication may be located.



context"--speaker, subject, audience, purpose. Even more elaborately, Hoffman and Shifsky (1977) urge that the topic specify structure, aim, audience, mode, tone, style, and organizational pattern. The importance accorded to such specification is agreed on, rather than proven, and Cooper and Odell (1978) suggest as an important subject for research the question of how test-writers should

> frame a writing task so as to obtain the best possible work from students. Must researchers, as Sanders and Littlefield (1975) claim, provide a full rhetorical context, that is, information about speaker, subject, audience, and purpose? Is there any aspect of the rhetorical context that we need not include in a writing task? Would an assignment that, for example, specified speaker, subject, and audience but not purpose elicit writing that differed significantly from writing prompted by an assignment that specified a full rhetorical context? (Cooper and Odell, 1978, p. 11.)

In the absence of the needed experimental evidence, and in the presence of the possibility that partial specification of context *might* make a difference, the safest course seems to be not to take chances, and to produce topics for the Teacher Competency Examination that give full specification of the class of discourse that has been demonstrated to have direct pertinence to a teacher's job.

There are, as we have already seen, several ways of embedding these specifications in any essay topic. The information may be given directly and abstractly, as in the Georgia tests we have examined--and, for that matter in the topics that were offered in the Handbook for the Teacher Competency Examination (Brossel and Hoetker, 1979), but which are now, obviously, being recanted. Or the instructions may be partially explicit and partially embedded in the examination context, as is the case with the typical ETS-type question. Or the instructions may be give concrete form in the sort of simulation or role-playing situation utilized by ACT and NAEP.

I tend to prefer the simulation-type topic, if for no other reason that it gives the examinee something closer to a genuine reason for writing, even if only in imagination. As opposed to the other possible ways of casting the topic, the simulation gives the examinee a sense of a real audience (as opposed to a generalized "typical teacher"), a sense of a real purpose (as opposed to the sheer obligation to produce), a sense of an issue of some real life consequence (as opposed to a purely academic exercise), and a much clearer understanding of the sort of _persona_ that is called for (one that may be generalized from one's real-life experiences in similar situation, rather than the much more uncertain and less interesting "student" _persona_; though the latter is, as has been conceded earlier, perhaps appropriate in a test whose purpose is, for example, to determine the examinee's mastery of the conventions of literary criticism).

If simulations are to be produced as topics for the Teacher Competency Examination, three additional issues must then be addressed:

1. Should the situations be explicitly educational, or will this involve the danger of converting the examination inadvertently into a test of knowledge?
2. Should a single simulation situation be presented or a variety of them, so as to accomodate especially differences among examiners as to the grade level they have prepared to teach?
3. Should the simulations make resort to audio technology, such as that utilized by ACT, or will it be adequate to present the simulations in printed form?

The attempt to produce explicitly educational scenarios or simulation-situations immediately runs into the problem that the majority of examinees taking the Teacher Competency Examination will be freshly graduated from college and will have had very limited experience with the realities of life in schools from a teacher's point of view. Topics which would ask the examinees to role-play in regard to some matter of disciplinary policy or parental relations or the like might tend to favor examinees with more teaching experience. On the other hand, educational topics would have face validity and the examinees are trained teachers and should reasonably be expected to have enough knowledge and enough imagination to apply that knowledge in a "what-if" situation (they will, after all, be applying it in real classrooms very shortly). A related problem is that students at different grade levels differ so vastly in their needs and capabilities, that a simulation general enough to involve both a kindergarten teacher and a senior high school subject matter specialist would be in danger of becoming a test of narrative invention rather than of writing ability.

The second issue is of course related to the first. One way of providing for the variations in the situations which examinees have been trained to face would be to provide at least two optional topics--one geared to elementary and one to secondary teachers. This is, in fact, perhaps the most satisfactory solution, though it still runs the risk of not being fine-tuned enough, and not always meeting the needs of examinees who have trained to be ancillary specialists of various sorts and not classroom teachers.

As to the third issue, the mode of presentation of the simulation, although I find the ACT experiments vastly interesting, and am moved to thoughts of even more elaborate stimuli utilizing film and videotape, such uses of media are for the future, if they are ever to be used at all. The production and testing of effective media stimuli would be expensive in terms of personnel and production costs, and would require more time to do well than is currently available.

I would urge, though, even if we must stick with print for the time being, that the Competency Examination staff should familiarize themselves with the details of the ACT's work and consider as a future option some experimentation with alternative methods of presenting essay topics.

So we have now reached the point where we are committed to recommending topics that

1. Supply essential rhetorical specifications via simulations or role-playing scenarios;
2. Call for types and levels of discourse that approximate those which teachers are likely to have to use in the discharge of their professional duties;
3. Deal specifically with educational situations;
4. Are presented in at least two variations, one suited to primary and elementary teachers, another to middle and high school teachers.

And now comes the hard part: can enough good topics meeting these specifications be written to suit the requirements of an examination that is to be given four times each year? The number of significant variations that can be rung on a topic meeting the above specifications is certainly limited. But actually, not all that many topics are needed--only enough so that even if the nature of the questions became public knowledge it would still not be possible for an examinee to be sure of what variation of the basic topic he would have to write upon. In the final section of this paper, we will present some topics that purport meet the above specifications. In reacting to these topics, recall what has been said earlier in several places, that the goodness of a topic cannot be established solely by one topic-writer's common sense and intuitions. The topic must be criticized and edited by competent specialists, and it must be field-tested, to see just what quality of essays it elicits.

But before presenting the specimen topics, another question of central importance, that of possible cultural bias in topics, must be dealt with.

SOME REMARKS ON THE PROBLEM OF BIAS IN AN ESSAY PRODUCTION TEST

Let it be admitted, first of all, that it would go against the universal experience of several generations of English teachers if it were to be found, on any essay test, that certain predictable groups did not perform better than others. Girls, for example, at least through secondary school, as a group invariably perform better than boys on academic tasks including writing (this despite the fact that, eventually, most professional writers and most professors of language are male). And it has already been suggested that teacher candidates who have majored in essentially verbal disciplines will have a decided advantage on an essay test over candidates who have majored in other fields. They will have this advantage because students taking many courses in such fields as, for example, English and history, will (1) have had more practice in writing, and especially in writing impromptu essays, and (2) will have had their writing criticized by professors trained in and concerned with the niceties of effective discourse.

Similarly, candidates who come to the essay examination from institutions in which a high and positive value is placed on the mastery of Standard English and its written dialect, Edited American English, will perform better than candidates from institutions in which spoken and written usage is a matter of indifference. For among the essential competencies to be evaluated in the writing subtest is the ability "to apply Standard English usage" (see Brossell and Hoetker, 1979, vol. 1, p. 12). Notice that the emphasis here is being placed on the candidate's educational environment, rather than on the candidate's social origins, since by the time a candidate sits for the Teacher Competency Examination, he or she will have been exposed to at least sixteen years of formal education, almost all of it involving textbooks and other materials written in Edited American English. A candidate who has received his collegiate education in a large university or one of the better liberal arts colleges will, almost invariably, have been exposed to a cosmopolitan social environment and to professors who write well themselves and demand good writing from their students. Candidates who have attended an institution in which the student body is drawn from a narrow regional, ethnic, or social class segment of the population, and/or one in which academic standards and professional standards are not in tune with those of the mainstream universities and colleges, will--through no fault of their own, really--be likelier not to have acquired an easy mastery of Edited American English.

Let me emphasize that these last remarks do not apply only to candidates from predominantly black colleges. They apply as well to candidates who have attended small, non-academic denominational colleges and small single-purpose teachers colleges (such as the one I myself attended, so I speak from experience--I first began to learn to write in graduate school, and, of course, am still trying to learn).

The problem of test bias comes down to this: is it fair to hold students who have had an education which has not demanded a mastery of Edited American English up to the same standards as candidates who have, for example, attended one of the great state or private universities or a superior liberal arts college? I would argue that, yes, it is, on two grounds.

First, a major purpose for the legislature's mandating a test of writing skill as a prerequisite for a teaching certificate is that a primary objective of public education is to equip all students to enter the intellectual and economic mainstream of society. The ability to speak and write Standard English is a prerequisite for employment and advancement in a great many occupations and a necessary qualification for most professions; and this is true whether or not Standard English is linguistically somehow superior to other dialects of English, and whether or not the high regard for Standard English is in fact an unpleasant vestige of racial and social prejudices of which the nation should long ago have rid itself.

The fact is that Standard English, in its various registers, is the language--and the only language--of written communications in business, commerce, government, education, scholarship, and law. Every student in school should, therefore, be given at least the opportunity to master this dialect so that he or she may use it for his or her own purposes whenever necessary. Every teacher of every subject, if this is accepted, should be capable of assisting, either directly or only by example, his or her students to master the Standard dialect if they wish to. Since one who cannot himself or herself produce the standard dialect surely and easily cannot possibly provide this assistance and example, mastery of the Standard dialect would seem on the face of it to be a valid certification requirement for a teacher. The fact that educational environments exist in which it is still possible for students to earn college degrees without attaining this mastery is in part the result of the lack of such a clear-cut policy in the past, and the present codification of the language skills requirement is, in large part, intended to assure that such discrimination against students whose circumstances do not allow them free choice of educational institutions will not be perpetuated into the future.

Second, I would argue that the written literacy requirement is simply not an onerous one. One could suppose, in fact, that the reactions of a candidate who, after completing a teacher training curriculum, is informed he or she can not write English at an acceptable level, could be at first surprise and perhaps indignation, but then something like gratitude for an objective appraisal of how he or she really measures up academically against others with the same number of years of schooling. The writing sub-test of the Teacher Competency Examination does not, remember, endeavor to rank students against one another, as an achievement or college placement test does. It simply identifies one large group of candidates who have displayed a minimal mastery of the conventions of written discourse and a (everyone expects) much smaller group who have not displayed that mastery. One who falls into the second group is not forever barred from teaching. A failure on the writing sub-test is simply information that the candidate, in one particular way, is not yet ready to teach. The positive response to such information would be simply to go and repair one's lack and take the test again. And it is, I would insist, just not that difficult to learn--or even to teach oneself (see Peter Elbow's _Writing Without Teachers_ for some practical advice)--how to write well enough to meet the minimal requirements of the writing sub-test.

Of course, real bias may exist in topics set on an essay examination. To take some extreme examples, a question which called on students to write on "My Family's Vacation" would be biased toward students from intact families well enough off economically to take vacations. Topics that required a skillful reading of a poem or a scientific text would be biased in favor of students majoring in particular disciplines. Topics requiring a familiarity with the biographies of Martin Luther King or Caesar Chavez or Menachem Begin would be biased in favor of students from particular ethnic groups. More subtly, a topic that contains references to customs or standards peculiar to one segment of the population will be biased in favor of students who happen to belong to that segment. A topic, for example, that called for a response to a narrative in which someone is designated as a bumpkin by such a reference as, "He wore white socks and brown shoes with his dark blue suit," would not communicate anything like the intended meaning to the many students from groups for whom such a sartorial combination would be utterly non-significant. The topic would be unconscionably biased. So would any topic that assumed a knowledge of how to prepare chitlins, or harness a mule, or hot-wire an engine, or train a dog, or sail a boat, or choose a wine, or eat escargots, or contact a bail bondsman.

But the constructive response to the circumstance that essay topics (just like objective items) can be culturally biased is not to attack essay tests in general, but to assure that procedures are set up which will effectively screen out elements of bias. (Advice has already been offered on editing and field-testing procedures that should achieve this end along with others, such as assuring the clarity, completeness, and appropriateness of the topic.) If, however (and given the limitations of readers and the innumerable forms that subtle bias may take, this is not impossible), after-the-fact analysis of test topics should reveal possible or obvious cultural bias, then this certainly should be, and will be, grounds for appeal and, if necessary, legal action. But it accomplishes nothing useful to argue that a topic is not valid simply because it is produced in the manifest effort to measure an educational attainment--in this case, mastery of written Standard English-that can with some assurance be predicted to have been differentially developed in different identifiable classes of candidates.

In a recent article on "Racial Differences in Validity of Employment Tests," Schmidt, Berner, and Hunter (1972) argued on statistical grounds that further research into "the pseudoproblem of racial differences in test validity" will not be fruitful, and that, instead, "psychologists concerned with the applicability of employment tests to minority groups should direct their future efforts to the study of determination of test fairness" (p. 5). This is precisely the tack that has been taken in the present essay, in that the whole argument has been directed toward devising a type of essay topic that will be maximally fair to the specific population for whom it is intended--college trained adults who are graduates of approved teacher-training programs and who aspire to teach in Florida schools. Toward this end the content, format, linguistic characteristics, and administrative context of topics have been examined, and the psychological consequences of different features of the topic have been considered. Now, in addition, it has been recommended that topic-writers and topic-editors be especially alert even to the subtlest and unlikeliest instances of class and ethnic bias in the content and wording of topics proposed for the Teacher Competency Examination.

The topics proposed below are, to the best of the writer's ability, culture-_fair_ but they are not culture-_free_ since college graduates in education themselves form a distinct sociological sub-grouping; which is to say, that the topics, if they are fair or valid within the intended population of examinees, will necessarily be unfair or invalid in a population of, for example, engineers, businessmen, doctors, or trade school graduates. The rest of the developmental and field-trial processes through which the topics will go before being included on an actual examination should, almost inevitably, result in a set of topics that are culture-fair within the intended population.

A GUIDE TO CRITICISM OF THE TOPICS

In the next section sixteen topics are offered, eight of which concern middle or secondary situations and eight of which concern primary or elementary school situations.

If one question from each level is included on each form of the examination (and that decision itself is one for others to make), that is enough topics for four administrations of the examination. After that, new and more timely topics need to be written, and the more successful ones from this set revised and revalidated.

Each topic is in the form of a brief scenario--a plot outline, phrased in the second person, of a mildly dramatic sitaution in an eduational setting. Each calls upon the examinee to assume his professional role and write a communication of a particular sort to a specified audience for a defiite purpose. Each scenario, it is intended, has the characteristics that have been identified as desirable in the course of the preceding argument. But the scenarios, though they have already been revised several times in response to suggestions and criticisms by my students and colleagues, are offered only as first drafts of topics. Before they are used,they should be subjected to further criticism and editing, and they should be administered to at least a small number of students of the same sort who will be taking the Teacher Competency Examantion.

It is suggested that the editors of the topics attend to the following sorts of questions, among others. (Some of the following points are adapted from Conlan, 1979.)

1. Is the topic interesting?
2. Will all candidates have enough information and experience to write the specified communication?

3. Is the topic biased in any way? Is there any element in the topic that could conceivably tend to favor or discriminate against any group?

4. Is the topic either too pedestrian or too sensational? Is it likely to arouse excessively emotional responses from the writer (or the reader)?

5. Is the topic clearly phrased? Is it perfectly clear what the examinee is to do? That is, is there any doubt about his role or the audience, content, and purpose of the communication.

6. Does the topic provide sufficient guidance and content, without supplying so much of either that it stifles the examinee?

About the essays that are written to a topic during the field-trials, the following questions, among others, should be asked.

1. Do the essays conform to the specifications of the topic? If not, why not?

2. Are the essays varied in quality? Can judgments of quality easily be made among the essays?

3. Are the essays generally interesting to read?

4. Do the examinees seem to have been

genuinely interested in what they wrote? Are the essays characterized by freshness and honesty, as opposed to cliches and conventional sentiments?

5. What signs can be found of troubles in the essays that might be attributable to weaknesses or ambiguities in the topics?

In general, following these procedures should result in essay test topics which will meet the guidelines for questions used in employment-related examinations, which have been developed over the years in Court decisions and the regulations of agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. (The highlights of these decisions and regulations are reviewed and summarized in an appendix essay to this paper.)

SIXTEEN TOPICS INTENDED TO MEET THE FOREGOING SPECIFICATIONS

Group 1: Primarily for Secondary Teachers

SCENARIO ONE: CRUISING AROUND. You find yourself teaching in a small high school where many of the students, especially the boys, seem to spend most of their leisure time cruising around town in their trucks and automobiles. From what students have told you, you know it is fairly common for a group of students to drive two or three hundred miles to another city, cruise around there for a while, and then head back home. You are perplexed by the aimlessness of this behavior, and puzzled by the students' apparent disregard for the energy crisis, for the President's pleas for energy conservation, and even for the rising cost of gasoline. (A few students, you know, have started going without lunch in order to keep their gas tanks filled.) You feel that a class discussion of the students' "hobby" would be educationally valuable for a number of reasons. It would enable you to understand some of your students better; it would get the students thinking critically about their driving habits, in the context of a national energy emergency; and it would almost certainly encourage class participation by some students who normally have nothing to say. You experiment with several approaches to motivating a discussion on driving habits, leisure time, and energy, and finally decide simply to assign the students to write an essay on the topic, "What the automobile means to me." (Even students who do not drive will have something to say on that topic.) But then you have an even better idea: you will write an essay on that topic yourself, duplicate it, and give it to the students as a model of the sort of paper you would like them to write. Write the essay now, on "What the automobile means to me," remembering it is addressed to senior high school students for the particular instructional purposes outlined above.

SCENARIO TWO: JOB APPLICATION. You are applying for a job in a wealthy suburban school. Everything you hear about the school is almost unbelievably good. The students are bright and well behaved. The parents are supportive. The classes are small. The pay is much higher than in neighboring districts. When you appear for your interview with the principal, his secretary gives you an application and asks you to fill it out before you see the principal. The form, you notice, has four pages, the first of which asks the usual questions about your education and experience. You fill in the required information and turn the page. The other three pages are blank, except for this question at the top of page 2: "What do you consider to be your most important strengths and weaknesses as a teacher?" Write an answer to that question that will make the principal want to hire you for the job.

SCENARIO THREE: BASIC SKILLS. You are a teacher in a district that is on the verge of adopting a "basic competencies" plan. One key feature of the plan is this: all students will be given a test of basic reading and writing skills in grade eight, and any student who does not make passing grades will not be allowed to enroll in high school--which beigns with grade nine in your district. Among the reasons that are given for this policy are (1) that high schools should be for mastering academic skills and subject matter knowledge, not for remedial work, and (2) that high school teachers are subject matter specialists and are neither interested in or trained for doing remedial work. The superintendent has asked for written statements of opinion on the plan from all interested parties, explicitly including teachers. You are to write the superintendent a letter explaining your opinion, as an involved teacher and a professional educator, of the "basic competencies" plan that will involve retaining possibly large numbers of students in eighth grade. You may write the letter in either of two roles. Either, you may write it as an eighth grade teacher, who will be affected in one way by the plan; or alternatively, you may write it as a senior high school teacher who will be affected in another way.

SCENARIO FOUR: GETTING TO KNOW YOU. You have taken a job in a senior high school where, you find, your students differ from you in almost every possible way--they are of a different race from you, a different social class, and, in general, have completely different backgrounds. You realize that you are going to get to know them and their life-styles before you can effectively teach them. But you are not intimidated by this; in fact you are looking forward to it. You also figure that your students are going to have to get to know you, too. So you decide you will tell them some things about you, as a person and as a teacher, which will make it easier for them to understand you and begin to work with you. (The students have struck you as mature enough to respond to this kind of approach.) Your job here is to write a note to the students telling them those things about you that you think are most important to their understanding of how you will behave as their teacher. (Don't worry about whether you will read them the note or pass it out for them to read.)

SCENARIO FIVE: NEW DIRECTIONS. The district in which you teach high school has just hired a new superintendent. You know he has a big national reputation and is coming to your district from an important job in government. He addresses all of the teachers on the first day of school. The major thing you remember about his speech is that he keeps insisting that too much time and money is being spent on remedial programs for students who still are unable to learn; and that it is his intention to turn things around and put most of the district's resources into enriching the educations of the talented top ten or twenty per cent of the students, who, he argues, are the one who can really profit from an education, and who are the ones who will be filling the vital jobs in society in the near future. You think for a while about what the superintendent said, and about what it may mean to you and to your students, and you decide to share you thoughts with a friend who had taught with you until he (or she) moved to another state at the end of last year. This friend will be familiar with the student body in your school district, and will be interested in your thoughts about the new superintendent's plans, so your main purpose will be express those thoughts as clearly and effectively as possible.

SCENARIO SIX: RECOMMENDATIONS. You are a teacher in a large high school. In the middle of the year you get a new student in one of your classes, and he (or she, if you wish) immediately starts to get in trouble with you and his (or her) classmates. Finally the student engages in behavior you not only find disrespectful, but interpret as physically threatening. Determined not to put up with such nonsense, you send him (or her) out of your room with orders to report to the principal's office. The student never makes it to the office, and in fact disappears from school for a few days. When the student finally returns, you refuse to allow him (or her) into your classroom and there is a nasty confrontation that is resolved only when two other teachers passing in the hall come in and help you convince the student to calm down and get out. (But, definitely, no teacher has touched the student.) As a last straw, you find out that the student has lied to his (or her) parents about what has happened, and they have filed a legal complaint about their son's (or daughter's) being beaten.

Then you receive a call to see the assistant principal who is in charge of discipline for the school. He explains that the student has been giving everyone else the same kinds of trouble he (or she) has been giving you. However, the issue of what to do is complicated by the fact the student was well-behaved at the school he (or she) last attended. So the assistant principal is seeking advice from teachers who know the student better than he does. And, since there is a complaint pending, he wants to have this advice in writing and for the record. What course of action--short of expulsion, which isn't warranted yet--would you suggest, to help the student if possible, or at least to protect other students and teachers from the disruptions the student has been causing? Write a memorandum to the assistant principal giving him your professional advice on the case.

SCENARIO SEVEN: GOOD YEAR. You are a high school teacher, and this has been one of those years when you have done everything right. All of your classes, in fact, are going along exactly as you want them to. The students are the sorts that you most enjoy working with; and, besides, you seem to have chosen course materials that really interest them, and to have established just the sort of classroom atmosphere in which they perform at their best. What you have, in short, is your dream situation. Then you discover that something has come up which will compel you to take a full month's leave early in the second semester. You are afraid that you may return to find that the conditions you have worked so hard to establish have not been maintained by your substitute. Even if he or she is a thoroughly competent teacher, your students will be confused and, as it were, lose their momentum if too many rules and conditions are changed in the middle of the year. There is not time for you to meet your substitute and explain how you have been running your classes. Your next best bet is to leave a note for your substitute explaining what you have done to establish the excellent atmosphere in your classes, and explaining as well why you have chosen to do things in that particular way with these particular students. Now write that note, remembering that your main purpose is to explain things fully and clearly enough that you will have a chance to return to the same good situation you are leaving.

SCENARIO EIGHT: HIRING. You are teaching your subject in a junior or senior high school in a district that is experiencing rapid growth. Your principal is a highly educated person who does some things in an unusual manner. The principal, for instance, insists on interviewing prospective foreign language teachers in the language they are certified to teach, not considering them further if they are unable to converse easily in that language. For another thing, when there is an opening in a department, he will ask the department chairman for a detailed list of specifications that a new teacher should meet. The principal has done very well in finding teachers who meet those specifications and therefore fit into the school's program very efficiently. (The teaching conditions in the district are so good, and the salary level so high, that there is never any shortage of applicants.) There is currently a need in your department for an additional teacher. Your department chairman, following the principal's lead, asks everyone in the department to given him a memorandum outlining the qualifications and personal characteristics of the "ideal" teacher in your subject or teaching area. The chairman will then consider all of the teacher's recommendations before making up his list of specifications for the principal. Write the memorandum to your chairman, remembering you are going to have to work with the person who will eventually be hired.

Group 2: Primarily for Elementary Teachers

SCENARIO ONE: GIFTS. You are an elementary teacher, and you have a class that has been, throughout the year, a pure delight. Your students are bright, eager, cooperative, polite, outspoken, intellectually curious, and full of good humor. They make you happy you have gone into teaching. It is only a few weeks until the end of school and you want to do something to express your respect and appreciation for the class. So you purchase each student an inexpensive copy of his or her favorite book (you have determined the titles earlier). You have a little ceremony in which you present the books to the students, each book complete with a warm personal note from you in the front cover. In addition, you take a good deal of time to write a personal letter to each student's parent(s), expressing your pleasure with the student's progress and your confidence that he or she will have continued success. A few parents express their thanks by letter or telephone, and you have several pleasant conversations with parents as a result of your gestures. But then you are shocked to discover that one parent has complained to the principal about your "unprofessional" conduct. You have, the parent complains, been teaching students by your example how to use bribery and flattery to curry favor. The principal does not take the complaint too seriously, but he suggests that to put the matter at rest, it might be good for you to write the parent a note explaining your reasons--both personal and educational--for awarding the gifts and writing the letters. Write that note, remembering that your purpose is to convince the parent that your motives were sincere and your actions not educationally harmful to your students.

SCENARIO TWO: TO HOLD BACK. The elementary school in which you teach is part of a school district in which all students are given standardized basic skills tests in reading, writing, listening, and mathematics in Grades 3, 5, and 8. At present, students who do not pass the tests are still promoted, but those with low reading scores are assigned to a special reading teacher, and those who make low scores in the other skills are assigned to work with individualized remedial materials in their regular classrooms. A parents' task force report has criticized the way the plan is working. Among other things, the report argues that students assigned to the individualized remedial materials are missing out on the lessons their classmates are studying, and, further, the fact that many different activities are going on at once in a classroom fragments the teacher's attention, so that none of the activities are supervised satisfactorily. The report recommends a return to the old practice of retaining students who fail the skills tests, giving them another full year to master the skills levels appropriate to a particular grade. A group of concerned teachers is formed for the purpose of studying the report and its proposals. You are named as a member of a committee that is to study specifically the recommendation about retaining students in grade. As a way to start the committee's work, the chair asks each member to submit a paper setting forth his or her own feelings about the issue. Write that paper, addressing it to your fellow teachers, and striving to make as clear as possible both your position on the promotion/retention issue and your reasons for holding that position.

SCENARIO THREE: ABUSED CHILD. You are teaching in an elementary school in an average sort of neighborhood. You have come to suspect that one of your students may be a victim of child abuse. A frail and quiet child to start with, the student has during the course of the year become progressively more withdrawn and has actually begun to regress in his command of academic skills. From tales you have heard from students who are this child's neighbors, you gather that the child's mother punishes him by depriving him of food and making him spend hours locked in a dark closet. She does not, it seems, beat him or abuse him physically, but the treatment the child is receiving is obviously harming him. You feel a responsibility to do something about the situation, but you realize you have no real evidence on which to base an accusation, and you do not want to play detective or confront the student's mother. You visit with the school social worker and explain your suspicions. The social worker agrees to initiate an investigation and to take whatever action is called for. But he asks whether there is not something that you can do in the meantime to help the child? Can you, perhaps, help him feel better about himself by giving him responsibility of some kind for which he can earn praise? Can you persuade some of the natural leaders among the students to help out by including the troubled student in their social interactions and school projects? Can you do something with the child on a one-to-one basis that will help? You agree to think about it and make your best effort. The social workers asks you then, because he anticipates that the situation may become unpleasantly sticky, to write him a formal memorandum for his records, in which you explain what you plan to do, as a teacher, to help the child overcome the effects of the psychological maltreatment he appears to be receiving. Write the memorandum now, explaining as clearly as possible what you intend to do and why.

SCENARIO FOUR: NEW JOB. You have applied for a job in an elementary school in a wealthy school district. The school has a reputation for being somewhat progressive and experimental, and the students, most of whom are well above average in ability, apparently respond very well to being given a degree of independence and personal responsibility, for the school's standardized tests scores are consistently near the very top of the scale. When you go the school for your interview with the principal, the principal's secretary gives you a four-page form which she asks you to fill out before your interview. You sit down and fill out the first page, which asks for the usual vital statistics. You then discover that the rest of the application form consists of blank pages, except for this paragraph at the top of page 2:

> Our school district offers an unusually fine and pleasant atmosphere in which to teach. Our teachers are professionals and are treated as such. Our pay scale is over 25% higher than any other school district in the area. We have, in short, the luxury of being very selective about the teachers that we hire. What special personal and professional qualities do you have that would make you a particularly valuable addition to our faculty?

Write an answer to this question that will make the principal want to hire you.

SCENARIO FIVE: EMPATHY. You receive a new student in your class in the middle of the semester. He is, you soon discover, subject to cataleptic spells. On the playground or in the hallways, he will just stop, frozen, staring into space and giving no reaction at all to anything around him. Fascinated by his odd behavior and his utter lack of response, other students have experimented on him during these seizures. They have pinched and poked him, pushed objects in his ears and nose, and, finally, pushed him over so that he has struck his head and had to be treated by the school nurse. After talking to a couple of the students, you realize that (for the most part anyway) there was no conscious cruelty involved in these incidents. Rather, the students' sensibilities are not developed enough to imagine that someone who behaves so differently, and who does not react in a normal fashion, can really be feeling pain in the same way they feel it. You realize you are going to have to lay down the law, demanding that no one touch the unfortunate student when he is in a seizure, but instead summon an adult to help. But you also feel that you may be able to make some educational capital of the event. So you plan to write a small speech on the subject of the importance of learning to imagine how you would feel in someone else's situation--and acting accordingly. Write such a speech, addressed to students of the age you plan to teach, using an appropriate level of language and appropriate examples and illustrations to make your points.

SCENARIO SIX: PHILOSOPHIES. You are a successful teacher, with very strong and well-formed ideas about how children learn and how teachers should teach. The father of one of your best students, however, has equally strong and well-formed ideas, and they happen to differ almost entirely from yours. Even though the parent -- a successful businessman -- is perfectly willing to admit that his child is doing extremely well under your methods, he still insists that you--and everyone else-would be better off doing things his way. At one Parents Association meeting, this parent gives a very heated presentation of his views and criticizes the school's present practices--referring to you by name. You are angry and embarrassed at the time, but you have no opportunity to respond. Later, when you have cooled off, you decide that the parent is simply enthusiastic and a little overbearing, but not unreasonable. So you decide to try to open communications on a more constructive basis by writing him a letter explaining your educational beliefs and the reasons for them. Now write the letter, striving not so much to convince the parent you are right, as simply to explain clearly what your educational "philosophy" is.

SCENARIO SEVEN: ADVICE. You are teaching in a good school, and you are enjoying your work. One day, you receive a letter from a former neighbor, a person of your same sex but several years younger. The letter informs you that the writer is now a college student and at the stage where he (or she) must declare a major field of study. One of the options the writer is considering is education, and the main purpose of the letter is to seek your advice. The writer knows, the letter says, all about the pleasures people say they receive from teaching and is aware of the problems teachers often face. What your correspondent really wants to know from you is, What does a teacher actually do on an average day? Write your former neighbor a letter explaining a teacher's actual duties in such a way as to help him (or her) decide whether or not to pursue a major in education.

SCENARIO EIGHT: RULES FOR GRADE ___. You find yourself teaching in a school where administrative leadership has been somewhat lacking and where most teachers seem to have allowed their students to do just about whatever they please, short of vandalism and physical violence. The prevailing atmosphere is not one you want to characterize your own classroom; and, especially, you want to establish an environment in which your students can get down to serious learning--for despite the fact the students are generally above average in ability, their test scores have consistently been very low. You decide that what you need to do for a start is to establish a few very clear and explicit rules for conduct in your class, along with an equally clear and explicit set of penalties for infractions of those rules. These rules and penalties and the reasons for them will be written down and duplicated and each student will be given a copy which he or she will be required to keep at his desk. And the whole document will also be written out on poster board and hung on the wall for as long as necessary. Now write out such a set of rules, reasons, and penalties appropriate for the grade level in which you would most like to teach.

THE "INSTRUCTIONS" TO INTRODUCE THE SCENARIOS

Instructions for an essay test should clearly and economically inform the examinee of what he or she is expected to do and how long he or she will have to do it. The instructions, further, should be carefully worded so as not to create anxiety or resistance by intimidating the examinee or insulting his or her intelligence. This means that one must, while providing necessary information and advice, be aware of the danger of, for example, overstressing the importance or difficulty of the test, or of including a long list of stern caveats, or of giving too many helpful hints on the order of "Avoid grammatical errors." The instructions should give the examinee (in a reassuring fashion) some information about how the essay he or she writes will be evaluated. And the instructions should be as brief as possible, so the examinee can get on with the test itself.

A sample set of instructions are offered below as fulfilling these conditions. These instructions should be subjected to the same processes of criticism and revision that the topic-scenarios themselves are subjected to.

INSTRUCTIONS. This portion of the examination gives you a chance to show how well you can write. You will find below two "scenarios" or outlines of problem situations, each of which calls for a written response of some sort. Read both scenarios and choose the one on which you prefer to write. Thank about the situation for a while; let your imagination fill in necessary details; use the blank portions of this sheet to jot down notes and to plan your writing. Then write the communication that is called for. Use the title of the scenario as the title of your paper.

Some of the situations call for a letter or memorandum. If you choose to write on one of these, do not bother with including addresses, saluations, closings, or the like. Simply write the body of the letter or memorandum itself.

There are, of course, no right or wrong answers on a test such as this. What is at issue is how well you write, not what opinions you may hold. The quality of your writing will be judged by a panel of three independent readers, who will not be aware of your identity and who will have been instructed not to allow their judgments of your writing to be influenced by their agreement or disagreement with your ideas.

You will have _____ minutes to complete this test. Use your time well. Plan before you begin to write and leave yourself time to read your completed paper several times, so you can make any necessary changes and corrections. (And--

please--your readers will appreciate legible handwriting.)

A specimen copy of the complete writing examination follows, as Figure 4. Note that the two scenarios included are different from, and additional to, those offered above.

. . . .

Insert Figure 4 here

. . . .

FLORIDA TEACHER COMPETENCY EXAMINATION
WRITING SKILLS EXAMINATION

CODE NO.	GRADE

Name____ Date________________

INSTRUCTIONS. This portion of the examination gives you a chance to show how well you can write. You will find below two "scenarios" or outlines of problem situations, each of which calls for a written response of some sort. Read both scenarios and choose the one on which you prefer to write. Think about the situation for a while; let your imagination fill in the necessary details; use the blank portions of this sheet to jot down notes and to plan your writing. Then write the communication that is called for. Use the title of the scenario as the title of your paper.

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You will have _____ minutes to complete this test. Use your time well. Plan before you begin to write and leave yourself time to read your completed paper several times, so you can make any necessary changes and corrections. (And--please--your readers will appreciate legible handwriting.)

....

SCENARIO ONE: TAKING CHARGE

You take a teaching job in midyear, replacing a teacher who has resigned after allowing his classes to run wild. Your first day with the students is pure chaos--they will not listen to you, or stay in their seats, or even pretend to do any work. You are determined to take control and not go through another day like that. But from everything you can learn about the students, they are nice, average youngsters who behave reasonably well in other circumstances. So before doing anything more drastic, you decide to give the students a chance to respond to a reasonable approach. You will prepare a statement for your students that will provide them with a few definite, unbreakable rules for behavior in your class, along with an equally definite set of penalties for infractions of the rules. Your statement, in addition, will contain at some place an explanation of the reasons for the rules. Now write this statement, addressing it to students of the age level you plan to teach, remembering that your main purpose is to establish your authority, so that you may avoid more unpleasant and protracted conflicts.

SCENARIO TWO: BASIC SKILLS

You teach in a school where a large proportion of the students have serious learning problems. Your principal is a democratic sort who always seeks out his teachers' opinions before making decisions that will affect them. He is under pressure from citizens' groups and higher administrators to do something to raise his students' scores on basic skills tests. A consultant hired by the school board to evaluate the school program has recommended drastic action: "Put total emphasis on reading and math skills," he has advised, " until scores in those areas rise to acceptable levels." Until then, no teacher will teach literature, drama, art, social studies, music, or anything else except basic reading and math skills. The principal asks his teachers for reactions to the proposal. Write your principal a memorandum on the subject of the consultant's recommendations, striving to concince your principal that your opinions are the correct one, which he should follow in making his decision.

……

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